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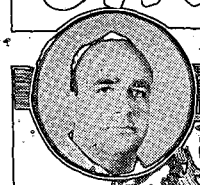
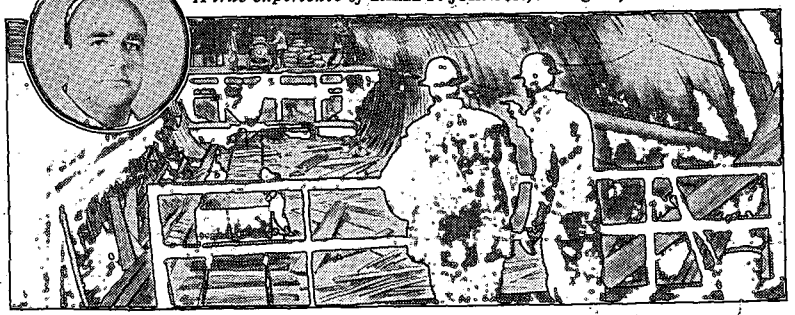
"DEATH STALKED US UNDER MOBILE BAY!"

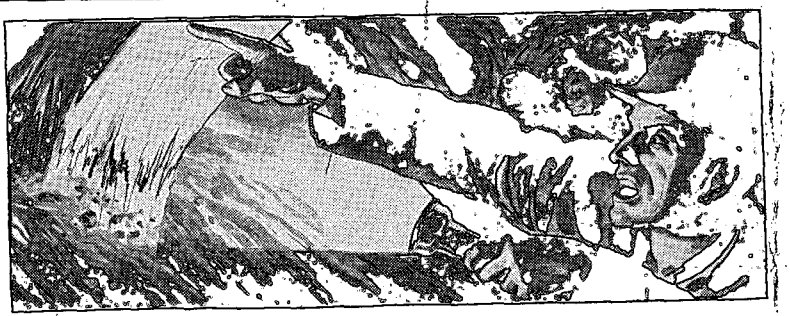


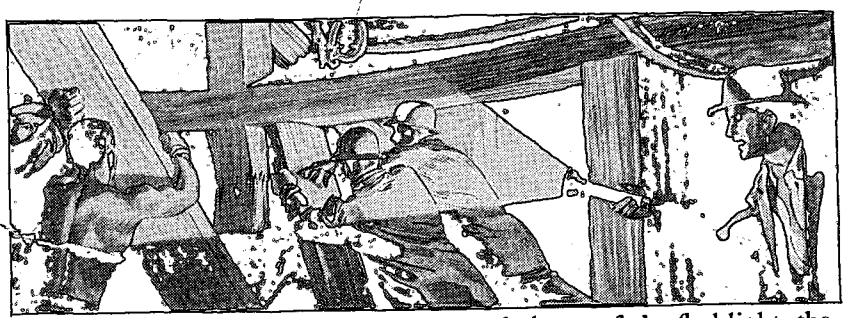
A true experience of EARLE P. JOHNSON, *Arlington, Va.*



"TWENTY FEET BELOW the muck of Mobile Bay," writes Mr. Johnson, "I was supervising a crew of sand hogs in the building of a new tunnel. Suddenly, to my horror, the lights went out. In the utter blackness I heard an ominous rumble.

"FEAR GRIPPED MY HEART as I snapped on the flashlight I always carry. By its beam, I saw that an entire brace of timbers was giving way! The kind of death that haunts sand hogs' sleep was facing us.





"THEN, WORKING LIKE MADMEN in the steady beam of the flashlight, the crew braced the timbers. Thanks to dependable 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries, we won a reprieve from death. Earle P. Johnson"

(Signed)

The word "Eveready" is a registered trade-mark of National Carbon Company, Inc.

FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER... *Look for the* DATE-LINE

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L.C. SMITH

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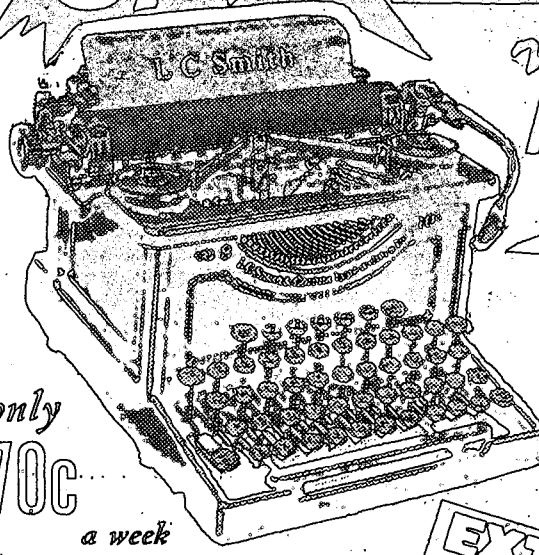
NOW $34.85 CASH

While 297 Last!



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Easy Terms—10c a day

No obligation. Send no money. See before you buy on wide-open 10 day Trial. Pay on easiest terms—only 10c a day. You get this genuine late office model L. C. Smith beautifully rebuilt with all standard improvements—basket shift, standard 84-character, 4-row keyboard, shift lock key, back spacer, 2 color ribbon, ribbon reverse, stencil cutting device, tabulator, etc. Ball Bearing throughout — quiet operation. THOUSANDS PAID $102.50 — IT'S YOURS FOR ONLY $34.85 (CASH PRICE). No risk, money back guarantee.

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Our 2 year ironclad guarantee is your assurance of satisfaction and long service! Our 30 years of Fair Dealing Backs This Guarantee.

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This late L. C. Smith with basket shift is the machine used by schools, large corporations and business houses the country over. The perfect, all-purpose typewriter for correspondence, office work, billing, manifold work, etc. Has all modern improvements you need, stands hard service — IT'S YOURS AT ONLY $3.00 A MONTH.

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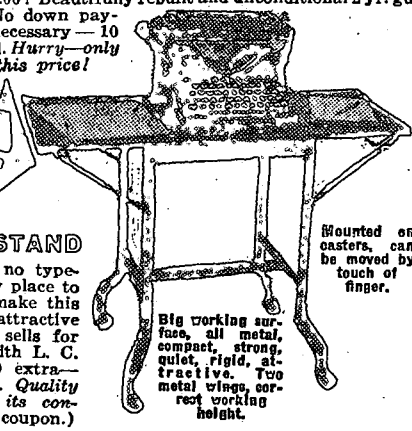

For those who have no typewriter stand or handy place to use a typewriter, I make this special offer. This attractive stand that ordinarily sells for $4.85 can be yours with L. C. Smith for only $3.00 extra—payable 25c a month. *Quality built. Just note all its convenient features.* (See coupon.)

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Accept this wide open offer now! Send no money. Use L. C. Smith for 10 day trial in your home. Return it if you don't think it the greatest value you have ever seen. If you buy, pay on easiest terms—only $3.00 a month. 2 yr. ironclad guarantee. **Avoid disappointment—mail coupon today.**

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Send me L. C. Smith (F.O.B. Chicago) for 10 days' trial. If I keep it I will pay $3.00 per month until easy term price ($38.85) is paid. If I am not satisfied I can return it express collect.

☐ 10" carriage ☐ 14" carriage ($3.00 extra) ☐ 18" carriage ($5.00 extra)

☐ Check for typewriter stand ($3.00 extra, payable 25c a month). Stand sent on receipt of first payment on L. C. Smith.

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THRILLING WONDER STORIES

The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction

Vol. XXI, No. 1
October, 1941

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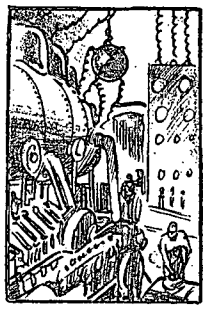

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A Complete Novel of the Past and Present
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ISLAND IN THE SKY

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

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ON THE COVER: The cover painting by Rudolph Belarski depicts a scene from Manly Wade Wellman's Novel, ISLAND IN THE SKY

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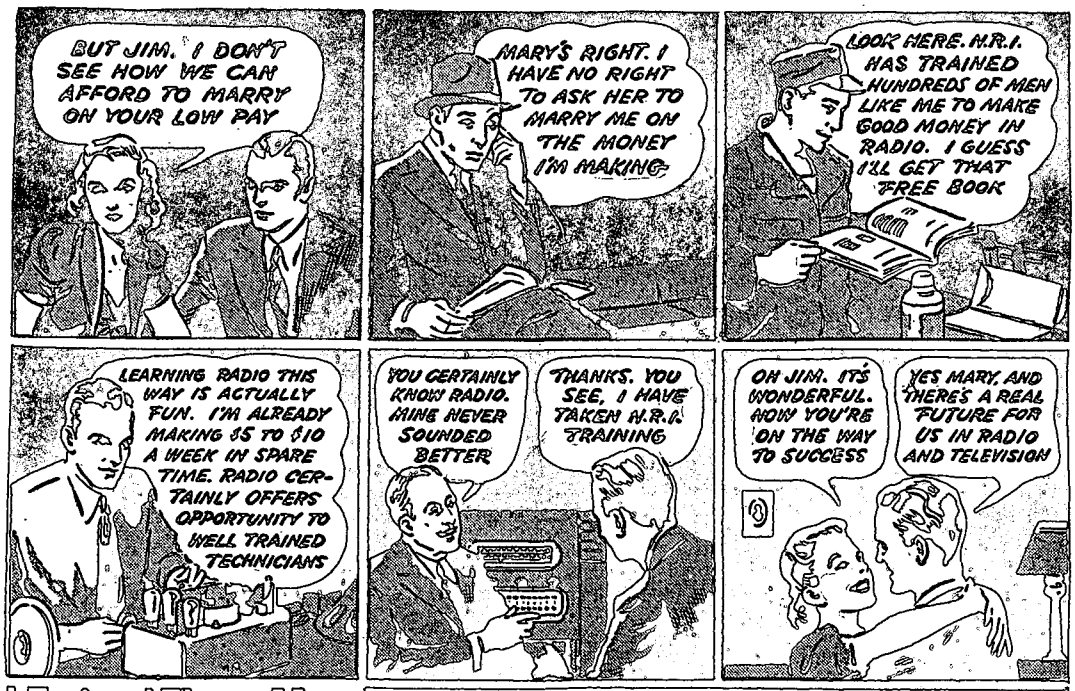

BUT JIM, I DON'T SEE HOW WE CAN AFFORD TO MARRY ON YOUR LOW PAY
MARY'S RIGHT. I HAVE NO RIGHT TO ASK HER TO MARRY ME ON THE MONEY I'M MAKING
LOOK HERE. N.R.I. HAS TRAINED HUNDREDS OF MEN LIKE ME TO MAKE GOOD MONEY IN RADIO. I GUESS I'LL GET THAT FREE BOOK
LEARNING RADIO THIS WAY IS ACTUALLY FUN. I'M ALREADY MAKING $5 TO $10 A WEEK IN SPARE TIME. RADIO CERTAINLY OFFERS OPPORTUNITY TO WELL TRAINED TECHNICIANS
YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER
THANKS. YOU SEE, I HAVE TAKEN N.R.I. TRAINING
OH JIM. IT'S WONDERFUL. NOW YOU'RE ON THE WAY TO SUCCESS
YES MARY, AND THERE'S A REAL FUTURE FOR US IN RADIO AND TELEVISION

I Trained These Men

Chief Operator Broadcasting Station

Before I completed your lessons, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined Station WMPC, where I am now Chief Operator.
HOLLIS F. HAYES,
327 Madison St.,
Lapeer, Michigan.

Service Manager for Four Stores

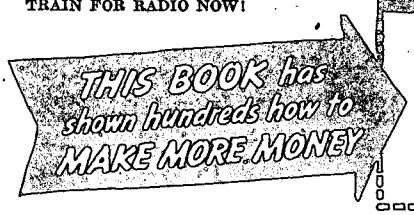
I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. I am now Radio Service Manager for the M..... Furniture Co., for their four stores.
JAMES E. RYAN,
119 Pebble Court,
Fall River, Mass.

$10 a Week in Spare Time

I repaired Radio Sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made $600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of $10—just spare time.
JOHN JERRY,
1729 Penn St.,
Denver, Colo.

Extra Pay in Army, Navy, Too

Every man likely to go into military service, every soldier, sailor, marine, should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty at pay up to 6 times private's or seaman's base pay. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. IT'S SMART TO TRAIN FOR RADIO NOW!



I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME *in your spare time for a* GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. Smith, President National Radio Inst. Est. 25 years

Here is a quick way to more pay. Radio offers the chance to make $5, $10 a week extra in spare time a few months from now. There is an increasing demand for full time Radio Technicians and Radio Operators, too. Many make $30, $40, $50 a week. On top of record business, the Radio Industry is getting millions and millions of dollars in Defense Orders. Clip the coupon below and mail it. Find out how I train you for these opportunities.

Real Opportunities for Beginners to Learn Then Earn Up to $50 a Week

Over 800 broadcasting stations in the U. S. employ thousands of Radio Technicians with average pay among the country's best paid industries. Repairing, servicing, selling home and auto Radio receivers (there are over 50,000,000 in use), gives good jobs to thousands. Many other Radio Technicians take advantage of the opportunities to have their own service or retail Radio businesses. Think of the many good pay jobs in connection with Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Public Address Systems. N. R. I. gives you the required knowledge of Radio for those jobs. N. R. I. trains you to be ready when Television opens new jobs. Yes, Radio Technicians make good money because they use their heads as well as their hands. They must be trained. Knowing Radio can win special ratings in the Army and Navy; extra rank and pay.

I'll Show You How to Make $5, $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Nearly every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part-time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for building test equipment, for conducting experiments that give you valuable practical experience. You also get a modern Professional Radio Servicing Instrument. My fifty-fifty method—half working with Radio parts, half studying my lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

Find Out How I Train You for Good Pay in Radio

Mail the coupon below. I'll send my 64-page book FREE. It tells about my Course; the types of jobs in the different branches of Radio; shows letters from more than 100 of the men I trained so you can see what they are doing, earning. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope or paste on a penny postal.

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 1K09
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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"The lessons are so simple. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course."

**S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.*

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"I am happy to tell you that for four weeks I have been on the air over our local radio stations. So thanks to your institution for such a wonderful course."

**W. H. S., Alabama.*

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"I've always wanted to play the piano accordion," writes *H. E. from Canada. "But thought I'd never learn it. Then I read about your lessons. I don't know how to express my satisfaction."

Music Lessons for less than 7¢ a day

Here's your chance to learn to play your favorite musical instrument—quickly and easily—*in your own home.*

YOU thought it was *expensive* to learn music? That it took lots of money to pay for a private teacher, sheet music and all the other essentials? That it required years of study?

Then here's grand news for you! You can learn to play your favorite musical instrument, *any* instrument, for less than SEVEN CENTS a day! That's ALL it costs. Not a penny extra for sheet music or anything else. And it doesn't take years, either.

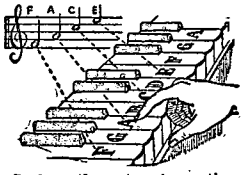
Play a Tune in One Lesson

Actually, you start playing a familiar melody in your very FIRST lesson. Then you go on from one tune to another, until your friends are surprised to hear you play.

You learn to play by *playing*—just as you learned the English language by speaking it. There is no lost time, no waste motion.

You learn by a remarkable short-cut method! A modern, simplified method that skips all the tedious, old-fashioned study and practice. A method that has literally swept the world, enrolling over 700,000 pupils. It's actually FUN to learn music this easy way.

Easy as A-B-C



Look at the notes above—they are F-A-C-E. Could anything be simpler? You are already learning to read music. And it's easy to play, too, for a remarkable invention, the "Note-Finder," tells you just where each note is located on the keyboard.

**Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by Professional Models.*

Here's the Secret

"A picture is worth a thousand words," says the ancient Chinese proverb. And that is the secret of this easy and fascinating way to learn music at home in spare time. Your lessons come to you in print and picture form. Large, clear illustrations show you every position, every move. And the accompanying text is like the voice of your teacher at your shoulder, explaining, coaching and encouraging you. You *can't* go wrong.

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See for yourself how easy it is to learn your favorite musical instrument this modern, short-cut way. And how inexpensive. Mail the coupon below, checking the instrument in which you are interested. Do it now. Instruments supplied when needed, cash or credit. U. S. School of Music, 29410 Brunswick Bldg., New York City. Forty-third year. **(Est. 1898)**

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I am interested in learning the musical instrument checked. Please send me your illustrated booklet explaining how I can learn quickly at home, for less than 7c a day.

Piano	Mandolin	Trombone	Piano Accordion
Violin	Saxophone	Banjo	Plain Accordion
Guitar	Trumpet	Ukulele	Hawaiian Guitar
Cello		Cornet	Other Instrument

Have you instrument?.....

Name .....

Address .....

City..... State.....

☐ Check here if under 16 years of age.

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"Give Me Your Measure Let Me Prove I Can Make You a NEW MAN!"

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps —yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

I know, myself, what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs. I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

Then I discovered *"Dynamic Tension."* It gave me a body that won for me the title "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

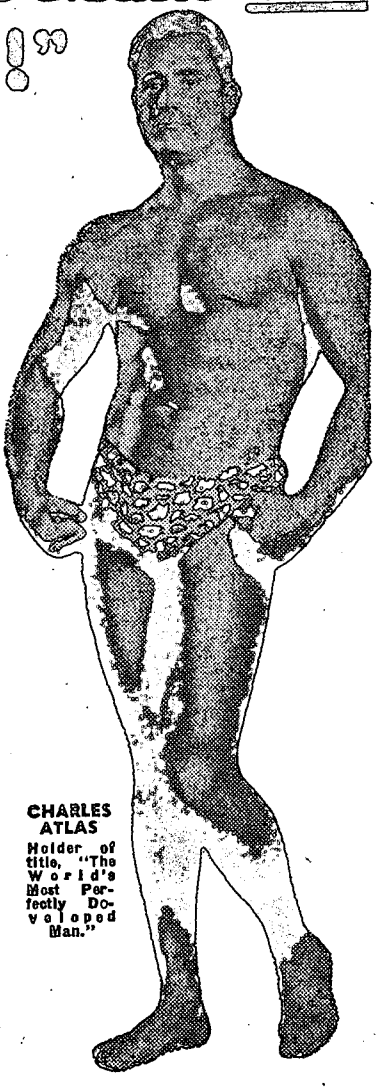
When I say I can make you over into a man of giant power and energy, I know what I'm talking about. I've seen my new system, *"Dynamic Tension,"* transform hundreds of weak, puny men into Atlas Champions.

What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do for You

Do you want big, broad shoulders — a fine, powerful chest — biceps like steel — arms and legs rippling with muscular strength — a stomach ridged with bands of sinewy muscle — and a build you can be proud of? Then just give me the opportunity to prove that *"Dynamic Tension"* is what you need.

No "ifs," "ands," or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, pepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about *"Dynamic Tension"* and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

"Dynamic Tension" is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results — and it's actually fun! *"Dynamic Tension"* does the work.



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FREE BOOK "Everlasting Health and Strength"

Mail the coupon right now for full details and I'll send you my illustrated book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." Tells all about my *"Dynamic Tension"* method. Shows actual photos of men I've made into Atlas Champions. It's a valuable book! And it's FREE. Send for your copy today. Mail the coupon to me personally. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 77K, 115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.

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115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me — give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name.....
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THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

THE world is changing so fast today—the man-made world, that is—that science fiction has to keep on the jump to stay even one leap ahead of actuality. Who could possibly have foretold, for instance, when the Wright brothers made their first sustained flight at Kitty Hawk in a heavier-than-air machine that a brief three decades would bring air power to death grips with naval power? And iron and steel dreadnaughts scarcely out of their swaddling clothes themselves, having evolved from that classic battle of the Civil War between the Monitor and the Merrimac.

Nor is this all, by any manner of means. Just last year at the New York World's Fair was exhibited and demonstrated a magnetic device which could suspend a metal plate in free air. And even Leonardo da Vinci designed, not one but several airplanes back there in the so-called Dark Ages. Which brings us quite logically to THE ISLAND IN THE SKY, this issue's lead novel of a streamlined, high-gear world of the near future.

DON'T TRUST THE FUTURE!

Manly Wade Wellman doesn't really do his story justice in the brief comment he makes on it here, but maybe he is saving all the big thrills for the novel itself. Anyway, here is what he writes about the genesis of THE ISLAND IN THE SKY!

It will look funny to some—but "The Island in the Sky" results from an attempt at realistic thinking.

The world is being changed by a widespread war now. Another war—other wars—may follow. Sometime there must be a complete revulsion, and an attempt at working a new order. The dominance of aviation in the present struggle suggests that aviators may make the peace and its terms—as Wells foresaw with his "League of the Airmen." However, airmen, for all their airiness are only men—wide open to error.

That's why I foresee a new order, very sweet to start with, suddenly growing top-heavy, hysterical, out of all reason, and finally tumbling. And a newer order to rise, one that for once will seek the best inspiration and cooperation from the old ones, in an effort to succeed. But you'll notice there's nothing at the end of the yarn to assure you that even the newer one will last. Don't trust the future! Just work and plan and pray for the best.

I thought for once that I'd have a central character who wasn't a strutting blond matinee idol. It may help you if you visualize Blackie Peyton as that very good actor, Brian Donlevy; Gramp as Charles Grapewin; Willie Burgoyne as Paul Robeson; and cast the other parts to suit yourself.

SPACE TRAVEL

In direct contrast to our suggested idea of a streamlined world, and yet as up-to-date as tomorrow's newspaper, is the conception of space travel in the future by Victor Rousseau. How a gentleman of Mr. Rousseau's attainments can propound such a solid and convincing theory as this and then go ahead and write such a rollicking story is beyond us. But read what he says about MOON PATROL:

Your request for a letter is about the hardest thing for me to do, harder than doing the story itself.

It seems to me that the idea of travel within the limits of the inner planets is hardly further off than the idea of circumnavigating the globe was in Columbus' day. In particular, travel to the Moon.

But I do not believe in the clumsy rocket system, when the secrets of atomic power are becoming unveiled. The splitting of the uranium atom, already accomplished, offers an enormous amount of power, while the discovery that helium at two degrees above absolute zero contravenes the laws of gravity makes the rocket idea unnecessary.

Another point is that the idea of a streamlined spaceship has no meaning in frictionless space. That is like the idea that the first motor car had to be built on the lines of the old-fashioned buggy.

I think the space-ship of the future will be built like a house, four-square, maybe with a belvedere on top. There is today no theoretical reason why Moon-travel should not become an actuality. My idea of a Moon-patrol was based on my recollections of suburban motoring, with crowded roads and tickets.

This led to humorous fields and, without trying to be too funny, I started writing "Moon Patrol," and, like Topsy, it just grew. I hope the readers like it.

THE BOTANICAL SLEUTH

What follows more naturally on the heels of space pioneering than colonization and then scientific exploration? Or maybe the exploration pushes colonization for second place. At least, the history of mankind is replete with this precise pattern of our restless activities. And thus we come—still logically, we maintain—to the classification and study of the flora and fauna of the explored planets—new worlds opened up for the probing of scientific minds.

In PLANTS MUST GROW, by Frank Belknap Long, we are introducing to you a brand new type of detective, a botanist who

(Concluded on page 10)

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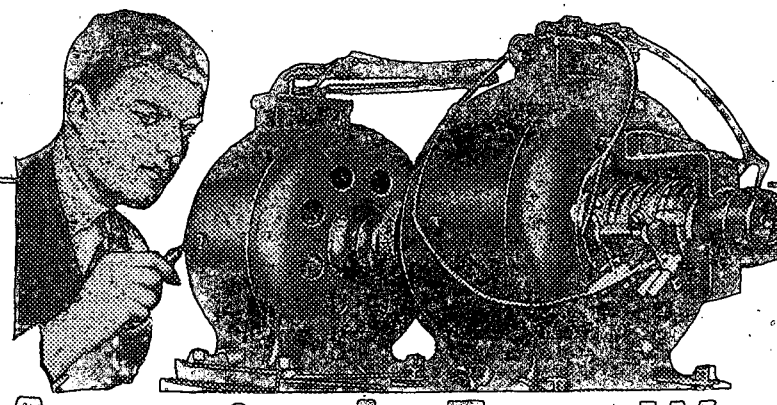

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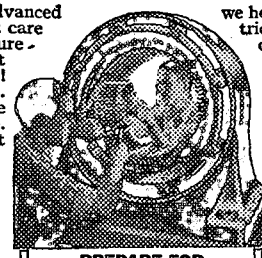

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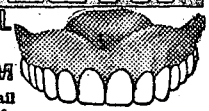

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THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

(Concluded from page 8)

solves criminal problems by, with, and through his chosen profession. Keep your eye on this man, Carstairs, for we predict that he is going to click as the engaging hero of a series of unusual science shorts. Here's what the author has to say about PLANTS MUST GROW:

Quaintly enough, this story was written on a velocipede while I was trying to get away from the peg formula. Velocipede is defined by Webster under definition c as—a bone shaker!

I was determined to write a tale of the future on a vehicle which would shake up the dry bones of peg-formula stories and drop them out through the under-spokes before carrying me to regions where characters were human all through and not used as wooden props for a crazy-quilt of speculative ideas.

I have no quarrel with speculative ideas. Some of the best science fiction yarns I've ever read have telescoped the impossible into nowhere, and sprinkled it over with Not-really dust. But those stories had real characters, too, and I've noticed that when the characters are merely pegs the ideas slip off and dwindle to insignificance.

I have always been fascinated by the theme problem of an idealistic young scientist who enjoys his job, and yet is somewhat at odds with his environment; a man with an adventurous streak in his nature which research alone doesn't quite satisfy.

In PLANTS MUST GROW I have tried to put such a character up in front and weave in the science as an integral part of his environment. I hope you'll like him, and Inspector McGuire, and the plants from all over the System which are constantly getting in the inspector's hair.

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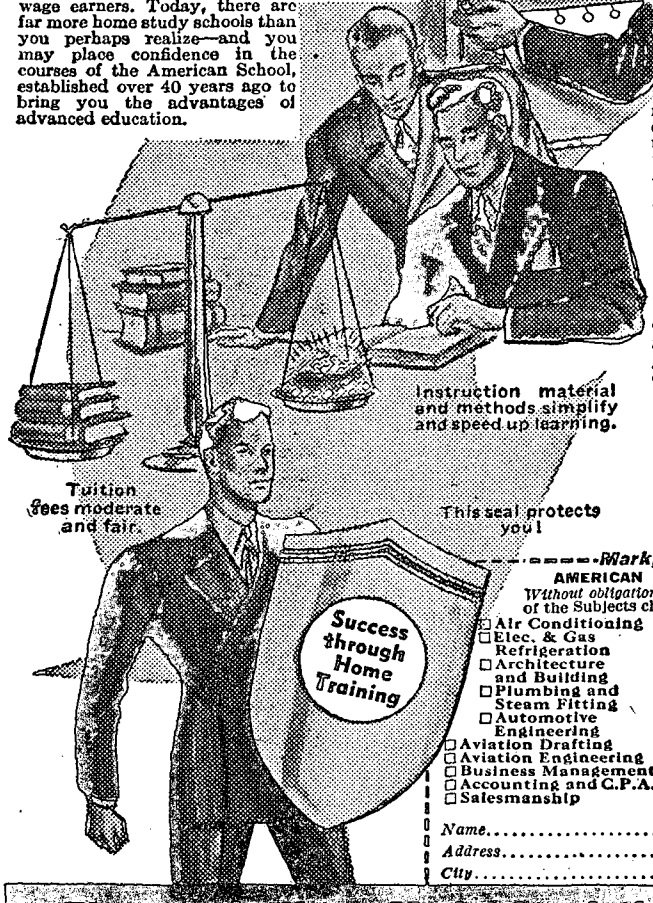
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Swap punching bag and complete mountings, slightly used, for chemical or photographic equipment or what have you? Robert Madeira, 201 19th St., Brigantine, N. J.

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BOOK REVIEW

THE OTHER WORLDS, edited with an introduction, by Phil Stong. 466 pages. Published by Wilfred Funk, Inc., New York, N. Y. $2.50.

HERE is a book that many science fiction fans have been awaiting as the giant anthology containing "the best modern stories of free imagination since 'Dracula' and 'Frankenstein.'" Anyway, that's what the publishers claim for it—and they've gone a long way toward making the claim tenable. However, the trained science fiction fan will soon note, during his delightful journey through this book, that some of his favorite types of stories are missing and that some of the stories included are not properly representative of the fantasy field.

Why this is so Mr. Stong himself makes clear in his introduction, in which he denigrates interplanetary yarns by saying that he could not find one worthy of inclusion. Since so many splendid interplanetary yarns *have* appeared within the past few years, we can only assume that Mr. Stong just doesn't like 'em and never will. On the other hand, Mr. Stong has a strong leaning toward supernatural and horror stories—many of which are included—stories which would make the rabid science fiction fan sniff!

Nevertheless, the average tale in this volume is of a very high order and the publishers and editor are to be commended for their work. My own favorites in this collection are "The Man in the Black Hat," by Michael Fessier; "The House of Ecstasy," by Ralph Milne Farley; "Adam Link's Vengeance," by Eando Binder; and —most entertaining of all—"The Comedy of Eras," Henry Kuttner's Shakespearian Pete Manx satire which first appeared in THRILLING WONDER STORIES.

The section of the volume devoted to "Horrors" features such names as H. P. Lovecraft, Manly Wade Wellman, Seabury Quinn, August Derleth and Mark Schorer, all familiar to readers of this magazine. While the stories in this section are off the science fiction track, they are uniformly well done and worth reading.

This collection is sure to further the interests of fantasy fiction—and we're glad to place it on our most prominent shelf.—A. S.

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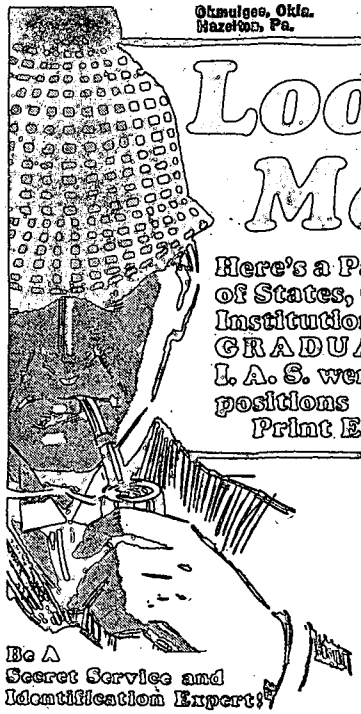

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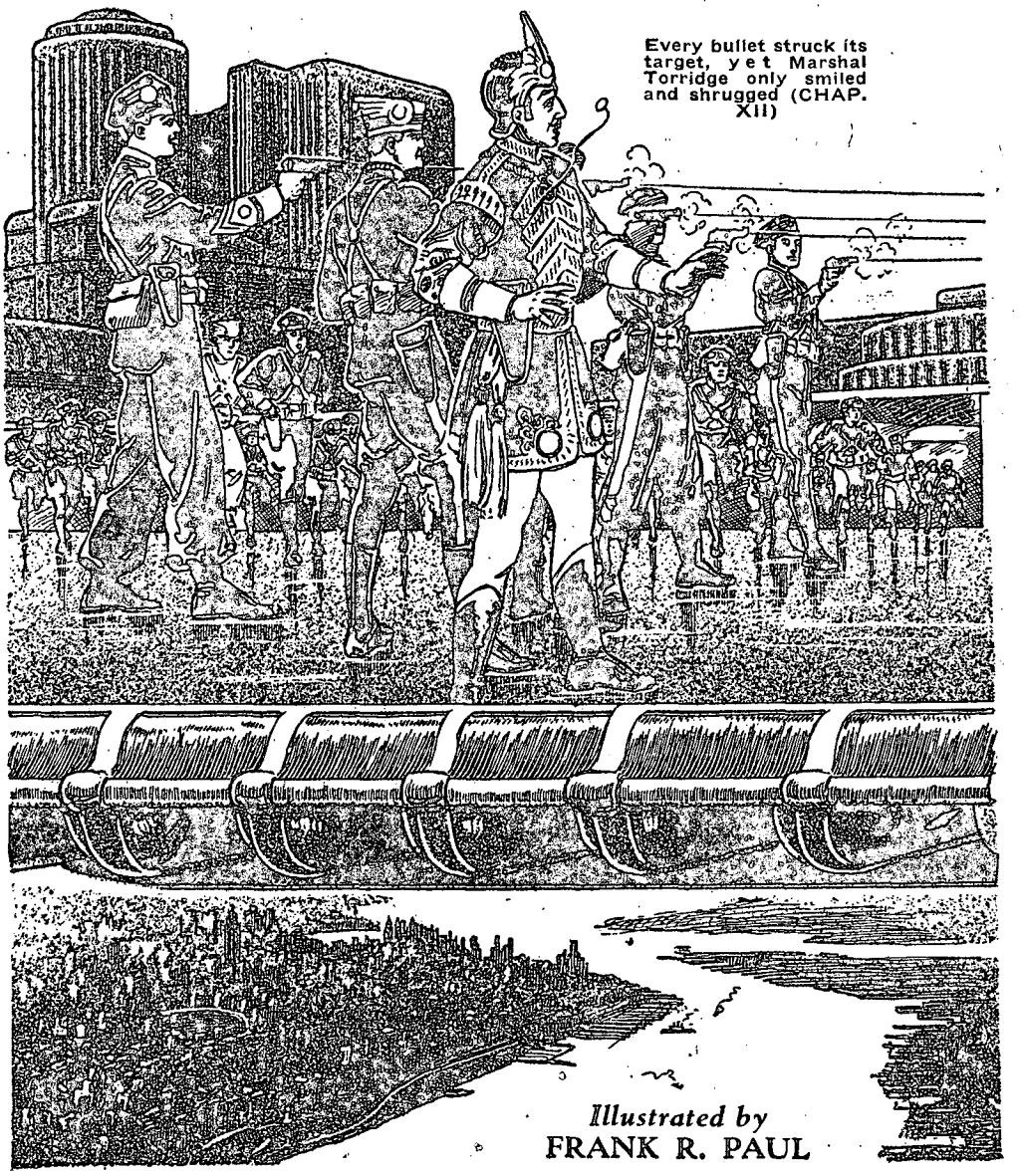

Every bullet struck its target, yet Marshal Torridge only smiled and shrugged (CHAP. XII)

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Blackie Peyton Returns to the Earth's Surface After Twenty Years in the Pit—and First Begins His Fight for Freedom!

CHAPTER I

Out of the Pit

IT was evening. The toiling gray-clad convicts in the Pit knew, because the guard yelled:

"Down tools! Get to quarters. Chow coming!"

They lined up at attention like old soldiers. All of them were lifers, pallid but beefy from wrestling machines in this atom-smashing plant. Behind them, under stuffy, yellow lights, hummed and droned the great procession of engines. Before them marched in the men of the night shift. The air was heavy. It was bound to be, fifteen miles underground, on the lowest level of New York City Prison.

The day shift marched into a dark

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corridor, which immediately was lighted by the glow from their hands and faces. A few years in the atom-smashery gave a ghastly but harmless radiance.

Beyond was the mess hall, where stew and coffee waited, rank with the vitamin concentrates necessary to men who lived and worked fifteen miles from sunlight. Beyond the mess hall stood the rows of cells, each five by seven, with canvas hammocks, barred doors, the odor of insecticide. But at the door to the hall stood a big guard with sergeant's stripes.

Thora

"I want Convict Peyton!" he announced. "Number 688-549J!"

The column halted. The lesser guard singled out a man.

"Fall out, Peyton. Rest of you, forward march!"

They filed into the mess hall, leaving the sergeant and one convict alone in the corridor.

Pierce Peyton, alias Blackie, Convict No. 688-549J, was medium-sized and hard-bodied. He wore a dark, bushy beard, covering much of his prison-bleached face. His eyes were bitter and three-cornered, the eyes of a fighter. In his pessimistic soul he looked only for blame and penalization.

"Warden wants to see you up yonder," the sergeant announced.

He led the way along the corridor to a steel panel marked "Decompression Chamber." They went into a metal cubicle. The Sergeant turned a dial that made the air hiss out slowly.

"We'll slack pressure for thirty minutes," he said. "Want to take a shower over there in the corner?"

Peyton looked at the shower stall and his eyes glowed. Whatever would happen to him, he would have the luxury of cleanliness. Wisely he refrained from questioning his guide. Throwing off his slouchy gray uniform, he lathered, rinsed and toweled. Stripped, he looked as white as a fish's belly, but tending the levers of the atom-smasher had made him brawny, especially his deltoids and triceps.

THEY left the chamber, went up for some moments in an elevator, then to a higher decompression chamber, a third and a fourth. Here was a chair and a trusty in a white coat.

"Shave, Peyton," the sergeant ordered.

The trusty obeyed, also trimming the shaggy black hair with its salting of gray. Still suspicious, Peyton tried not to show how he enjoyed being shaved. His face proved to have a heavy jaw and a tight, scornful mouth. A chin-dimple did a little, not much, to relieve the set savagery of his expression. He hadn't gotten young at atom-smashing since he began—how long ago—twenty years? It seemed a million.

Up through more decompression chambers, to the fifth, sixth and seventh levels. It took time for a man, used to the Pit's compressed atmosphere, to get ready for pressure at sea-level.

At the ninth chamber, another trusty waited with stacks of shirts and socks and several cheap suits. Peyton, neither small nor large, proved easy to fit. He put his feet

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into rough tan brogans. The sergeant handed him a necktie, which Peyton recognized.

"I wore that the day they slung me in," he said. "Where's the rest of my property?"

"Styles have changed," the sergeant reminded. "This is Nineteen hundred and Eighty. You've been in stir for twenty years."

SO it really had been only twenty years. Peyton faced a mirror to knot the necktie. He studied the square, white face, unrecognizable as the boy he had been. . . .

"Don't stand there worshiping yourself," snapped the sergeant. "The Old Man's waiting at dawn. We've killed most of the night in these decomps."

They entered more elevators and decompression chambers, finally reached the warden's office. It was a business-like room, in which sat a plump blond man behind a heavy desk. He looked up from a big printed paper with a red seal.

"Pierce Peyton," he greeted the convict, "alias Blackie Peyton, about our third or fourth most incorrigible inmate."

Peyton kept silent. Most of the guards called him the worst convict, bar none.

"You came here as a boy of sixteen, sentenced for murder," continued the warden.

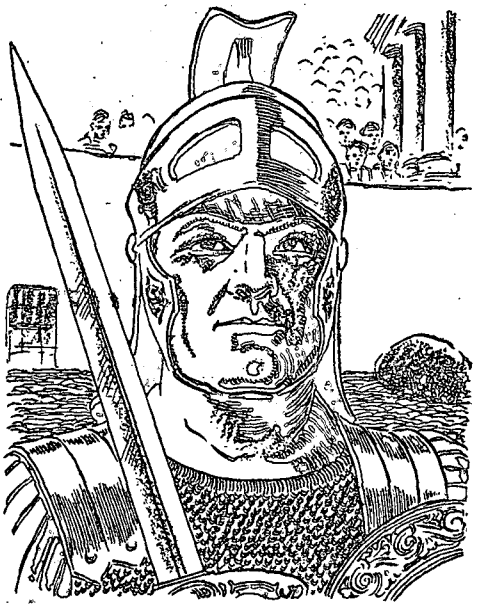
Still Peyton made no reply. What good would it do to point out that he had neither touched the gun, nor pulled the trigger? As a foolish orphan kid, falling in with two criminals he thought dashing and indomitable, he had been present at an attempt to rob the payroll of a big factory at home in Rochester. A messenger resisted and was shot. His companions had escaped. He, glued to the spot with terror, was seized by police.

Furious because he bore the blame and punishment for his accomplices, he had rebelled against prison routine, forfeited all privileges.

"You were sent to the lowest level of this prison to help run the atom-smashing machinery that supplies power necessary to civilization. Only at that great depth can the machinery have the proper atmospheric pressure to operate. Law provides that rebellious and dangerous convicts shall serve at the machines. You have smashed atoms almost continuously from Nineteen hundred and Sixty to Nineteen hundred and Eighty."

"I know all about it, Warden. You didn't dredge me up out to the Pit just to hear my record."

A harsh smile appeared on the warden's face.



Blackie Peyton

"I want to do you a favor." He consulted his paper. "It seems that three weeks ago, a rookie guard got caught in a roller machine down in the Pit. It got him by the skirt of his tunic and he couldn't reach back and tear loose. He was about to be dragged in and crushed, but you saw and ran to help. You forced the roller jaws apart with your bare hands, a considerable feat of strength—"

Peyton sneered. So the guard had told, after all! Peyton had acted on impulse in saving that life, but the other incorrigibles in the Pit would

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have beaten him half to death for aiding a hated guard. He had asked the fellow to keep still. Apparently the story was out, though. What would happen to him when he got back to the Pit?

"I didn't think," he snarled.

"The whole prison system is grateful to you, Peyton," said the warden.

He handed over the paper. It was a formal order, signed by the secretary of the State Board of Pardons, for the unconditional release of Pierce Peyton, No. 688-549J, from confinement. Peyton read it through, sat down heavily in an armchair.

"You're free, Peyton," the warden told him. "Going out in the world again."

Out in the world! What was it like, after twenty years? Peyton furrowed his pale brow.

"Things must be changed," he muttered.

"They are, Peyton. Greatly changed in every way." The warden held out his hand. "Take these dark spectacles. You'll need them Take this, too."

He peeled five bills from a roll of money and wadded them into Peyton's vest pocket. Peyton looked up, still stunned.

"What'll I do out there, Warden? I was just a kid when I came in. No folks. No money. The only job I know is smashing atoms."

"We've taken care of that, too," soothed the warden, handing him a card. "Take the pneumatic subway just outside the gates. In New York City present yourself at the offices of the Board of Pardons. They have a job for you. Good luck."

He offered his hand. Peyton, brain whirling, did not notice. He walked blindly through the outer door.

In the closed front yard, a sentry looked at his release order and opened the outer gate. Peyton almost ran out. The Sun was coming up.

"The Sun!" he cried.

He turned his white face to it. The light filled his eyes and he made an agonized grimace. It was as though acid had been thrown on his face. Hurriedly he donned the dark glasses.

A deep, penetrating voice spoke which seemed to come from nearby:

"New York subway here. New York subway here."

Peyton peered about. He saw the source of the voice—an amplifier above a kiosk. He entered.

BLACKIE PEYTON walked into the office of the Pardon Board, just off one of the covered travelways that had been a street in the days when New York consisted of many tall buildings, instead of a single vast one. A trim girl with bleached hair took his card and departed to a rear office. Peyton watched her with interest for he had not seen girls in twenty years. He tried to keep that interest mild. After all, he had plenty of toiling and thinking to do before he would be well enough established to pay attention to girls. That must wait.

She returned with a dapper young man who wore a small, gay mustache.

"Ah, Peyton!" chirped the man, giving the visitor a limp moist hand. "We were told to expect you. All is arranged. My name is Harrett, assignment supervisor. Sit down." They took seats on opposite sides of a dark-painted table. "I understand that you've worked with machinery."

Peyton removed his dark glasses, blinked in the subdued light.

"Yes, in the atom-smashery," he replied.

"The atom-sm— Oh, dear, dear!" The news seemed to distress Harrett. He fiddled with his mustache. "That *is* awkward."

"Awkward?" repeated Peyton, mystified. "Why? I was a good hand."

Apparently this statement made it more awkward still.

"You see, Peyton, the atomic power you have worked with is a—eh—a Government monopoly. Knowledge of its production is withheld by law from the public. Do you—uh—understand the production?"

"In a general way. I worked the machines, sometimes helped treat the minerals they mined in the Pit, or made the little containers out of inerton."

"Say no more, Peyton," Harrett actually begged. "You have been too long in—eh—confinement. You do

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not know, I am afraid, what things are dangerous to discuss. Now about work for you, I have decided to send you to the mines just north of—"

"Mines? Look, Mr. Harrett, if it's all the same to you, I'd like to be outside. I've lived underground long enough."

"Please," Harrett said. "It is my place to assign you where I think you would fit in best."

"Haven't I anything to say about it?"

"You are being unreasonable, Peyton. This board wants to give you a chance at rehabilitation—"

"Who asked you to be my stepfather?" Peyton pushed back his chair. "I can take care of myself. Rehabilitate somebody else."

"No!" Harrett rose flutteringly. "You cannot go out like that."

"Can't I?"

"You are an ex-convict, without means of support," chattered Harrett. "If you are set free in this community, you will undoubtedly go back to criminal ways. Stop, Peyton! Don't leave this place!"

As Harrett's voice rose, a side door opened and in stepped a plump, coarse-looking man in a neat blue uniform.

"Arrest this man!" Harrett commanded.

Peyton kicked the table out of his way, raced up to the uniformed man, hit him six times in the face and body within the space of four seconds. At the fifth wallop, the heavy body began to wilt. At the sixth, it collapsed awkwardly. The bleached girl had also come back into the room behind the railing. She screamed tremulously. Harrett sprang at a desk that was studded all over with push-buttons, but Peyton got there first.

"Sit down, cutie," he ordered Harrett. "That's right. Now, if you move before I'm out of here, I'll stretch you on the floor beside that tub of lard you siced on me."

Harrett seemed frozen to his chair. As swiftly as he had moved when attacking, Peyton rushed to the outer door, through it and into the maze of ceilings, arcades, cubicles and tunnels that made up New York City of 1980.

As he fled, he breathed fiercely, his mind in a turmoil. Hadn't he been set free by the warden? What was this trick they'd tried to play on him, practically sentencing him to another kind of hard labor? What had happened to the world he had known?

CHAPTER II

Strange and New

THE subway had dropped Peyton at the door of the big building which housed the Pardon Board's office. Eagerly he had hurried to ask for the promised job. Now, panting with fierce anger, his knuckles still tingling with the impact of the blows he had struck, he emerged and took his first look at the public street.

It was really a passage. Yards wide, apparently miles long, it was sleekly walled and roofed solidly. Glaringly lighted by immense frosted globes. On either side ran a wide walk, thronged with people. In the center were four lanes of traffic. The automobiles were smaller than the models Peyton remembered and tended toward an olive shape. They were painted brightly. Most of them were delivery vehicles. None gave off any odor or made a noise louder than a hum.

"I'd like to have one of those," thought Peyton.

He started. The air was filled with a shouted command:

"Chew Cardomint! Chew Cardomint!"

This was the advertising of the Nineteen hundred and Eighties. There were no large printed signs, neon or bulb-studded, such as he once knew. The appeal was to the ear. He walked a block, crossed the street on an overpass. Another advertising voice dinned:

"You need Wake-ups!"

But under this, like an obligato, the nearer shops had their own amplified messages: *"Drink Limex — perk up! It's better at Brummagem's! Hurry-Rub for the hair!"*

"What now?" Peyton was wondering. The squabble at the Pardon

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Board had thrown him out of his one chance at employment. He must think about getting to Rochester, where he had lived. He might find some friend of his dead father who would help. First of all, however, he wanted food. He had not eaten since yesterday. He stopped before a modest window in which a white-capped man fried pancakes.

"Eat cheap!" bade a speaker horn above the door. *"Eat cheap!"*

Peyton went in. At a counter of gleaming black sat four men on stools, eating. Peyton saw no menu card, but another loudspeaker was babbling:

"Pancakes, eggs, ham, bacon, oatmeal—"

"Give me some of those griddle cakes," Peyton told the counter man. "Ham and eggs. Coffee."

"No coffee," the man told him, plainly surprised at having to give the information. "You want Cafeno? Dixie Blen? Brazillo?"

"Whichever tastes the most like coffee."

The food arrived promptly, plates riding on conveyor belts behind the counter. Peyton ate and drank with relish, making only a slight grimace at the coffee substitute. The menu babble died abruptly and a crisp, cultured voice announced:

"Attention, New York, this is the Flying Island!"

Peyton looked up. A rectangle had lighted up behind the counter—television, better than he had known in 1960. It reflected in bright colors the image of a man in khaki uniform and visored cap, wearing monocle and a superior smile.

"Attention!" the image said again. "Message from Marshal Torridge. Important!"

The face changed. The new figure was half-length, an elegant person in blue and gold uniform, with the delicate features and lofty air of royalty.

"Citizens of New York," came a slow, deep voice, "I, as marshal of the Airmen, here and now appoint a new administrator for you. General D. D. Argyle will immediately assume command of all bureaus and departments. . . ."

"What's all this about?" Peyton asked his nearest neighbor, who stared in utter astonishment at such ignorance.

"And now," the figure called Marshal Torridge was saying, "we shall demonstrate the might of the Airmen!"

SUDDENLY the screen filled with gleaming, speeding aircraft, lean as torpedoes and as deadly seeming. They were maneuvering against a brilliant noonday sky, which gave them a blinding silvery sheen. The view faded into a glimpse of uniformed men, drawn up like a line of soldiers, handling rifle-like weapons. Then there was a blare of music and finally Marshal Torridge returned.

"That is all," he said. "Do your duty as citizens of New York."

The screen darkened. Peyton, who had understood little or nothing, drew out money to pay for his breakfast. He stared at the bills the warden had given him. Each was for a thousand dollars.

"Five grand!" he whispered. He faltered to the counter man: "The smallest I've got is a—a thousand dollar bill—"

"Okay," grunted the counter man unawed. He handed back a smaller green bill marked "Five Hundred," and a disk of metal stamped "$100." Peyton studied them in mystification, then in suspicion.

"Is this all I get?" he demanded.

The counter man pointed to the empty dishes.

"Cakes, hundred-fifty. Eggs and ham, two hundred. Cafeno, fifty. Four hundred from one thousand leaves six hundred." He glared. "What do you expect for four hundred smackos—the Ritz?"

"Look, I'm just a stranger," Peyton said. "I'm not up on this. Is money so cheap?"

Other customers volunteered information. Four hundred dollars for a hearty breakfast was most reasonable, they said. Peyton shrugged, thrust his money carelessly into a trousers pocket. Feeling no more awe for his thousand-dollar bills, he went outside.

A big rectangle of parklike lawn

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was open between lofty walls and roof-levels to the cloudless sky. Trees and shrubs grew in thickets throughout. Peyton found a bench near a central pool and sat down. His eyes behind his dark spectacles were puzzled.

He had been in New York for six hours and it was more than he could understand. Tiers, galleries, arcades, halls, shouted advertisements, speeding silent vehicles, strange folk who knew all about it while he knew nothing— The warden had been right, but not helpful, when he said that everything was changed.

Who was going to help him? Peyton shook his head.

Someone sat down at the other end of the bench. The newcomer was a lean, ragged man with gray whiskers and a wrinkled, rosy face. His old eyes were bright and humorous. Peyton studied the face, liked it. He had an inspiration.

"Want to earn some money?" he asked.

The old man turned toward him.

"Doing what?"

Peyton drew out his little roll of bills and detached a thousand-dollar note.

"Take this and tell me all you know about what has happened in the last twenty years."

THE old man did not move to accept.

"What's happened to what?"

"Everything." Peyton thrust the bill into the thin hand. He puzzled over an explanation, decided to tell the simple truth. "I've been in prison since the fall of Nineteen Sixty. I'm out today."

"Congrats."

"Thanks. Begin with Nineteen Sixty. The Third World War broke out just when I was put away. Who won?"

"Nobody," the old man replied. "It lasted about a year. Fleets sunk, armies shot to hash. Only the air forces came through it and they kept busy bombing each other's towns, like throwing stones at each other's kid brothers. Not many kid brothers left by summer of Nineteen Sixty-one."

General Argyle

He pushed the bill back. "Keep it. I've eaten today."

"So the war burned itself out?"

The gray head nodded. "When the air forces had bombed everything to pieces, they were all that was left, so they made peace. They were running things on both sides, anyway. They still do."

Peyton remembered scraps of the television broadcast.

"How can an air force run things?"

"I'll try to make it simple, Mr.—"

"Blackie Peyton."

"I'm Joe Hooker. They call me Gramp, though I never had a family. Yes, the Airmen were left to build the world again. Everything was killed or burnt or blasted. New York is all new, you see."

"Yes, it's not like I remember it," confessed Peyton. "And my home town, Rochester, probably has changed, too."

Gramp snorted. "There ain't no Rochester, no Schenectady, no Albany! All bombed to flinders. Nothing but woods and wreckage today. Hardly anybody lived through it and all who did gathered at the big towns."

Peyton felt a chill. Rochester gone, destroyed, grown over with wilderness! His last faint hope of finding

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his former friends simply vanished.

"Open country's gone back to the Indians," Gramp Hooker continued, "only there ain't any Indians. I've heard tell there's a Philadelphia somewhere, rebuilt like this place, but I can't say for sure."

"You can't say about Philadelphia? Why not? Don't New Yorkers know anything except New York? That sounds—"

"Wait, wait!" interposed Hooker. "Let me back up to where I told about the Airmen building and running things. Around the world, as I get it, there's a string of cities. New York, London, Berlin, Moscow, Tokyo, Frisco, Chicago, and places along that zone. They were built by the Airmen, or rather the Airmen made the people that were left build them. Here and there, to north and south are other big centers, though I couldn't say where, or what names. I suppose they're mostly like this place.

"New York's a great, big heap, all sorts of buildings and tunnels and spaces jammed together. Quarter-mile high, five or six miles square. There are holes in it down to ground-level, like this park, so we can get some light and air if we come after them. But mostly it's tiers of shops and offices and dormitories and such. Outside is a bunch of fields and farms, run by the city to feed us. Factories right in the city. Used to be mines, but they dig next to town, miles deep."

"I know," said Peyton. "I've been down there."

There was silence again. From the nearest high wall came a distant but audible voice, extolling the desirability of a synthetic tobacco.

"What's happened to billboards?" asked Peyton.

"Not many folks read these days. Only old coots like me. It's—well, out of fashion, so the ads are yammered out, not printed. You'll get used to it."

"I wonder," muttered Peyton.

GRAMP shook his head and continued.

"We farm and mine and do other things close by. Not much trade or travel. Country a little way off is gone back to the forest. Trees and brush grown up where there used to be towns and farms. And animals—lots of bears for instance—track down from the Adirondacks. Quite a few generations of bears can grow up in twenty years.

"Also what some folks call wolves, but I figure they're just dogs, forgotten and run wild. There must be good hunting, if a fellow had a gun."

He looked wistful. "Guns ain't allowed, though."

"Nor real coffee," added Peyton with equal longing. "I'll bet the Airmen have real coffee and guns, too."

"I suppose so," agreed Gramp. "We can't be too sure about them, or the other towns, only what they want to tell us. And speaking of the Airmen, here they come."

It was almost exactly noon, but a shadow fell across the bright park.

Peyton saw the Sun disappear behind something that blotted the sky. Nightlike gloom fell, stars showed. Then the thing moved past the Sun and away toward the horizon.

"That," said Gramp, "is the Flying Island."

"But what is it?" Peyton blurted.

"What I say. A flying island, a mile across. It stays up there, twelve or fifteen miles, keeps neck and neck with the Sun. In this part of the world, that takes about seven hundred miles an hour. The Airmen live on it and it's always noon for them. They keep tab on the whole world, sliding over every city once a day."

"They've got that thing forever flying, with the world spinning down below, and all the guns and airplanes and atomic power?"

"Better not talk about atomic," warned Gramp. "It's their pet taboo. We ain't only not supposed to use it, we ain't even supposed to think about it."

Peyton remembered the agitation of Harrett at the office of the Pardon Board, decided to drop the subject immediately.

"Does anybody know why the Airmen take all that trouble to keep that thing going?"

"To keep watch on their ring of cities, naturally. The cities feed

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them and furnish them and pay taxes and entertain them—"

"Entertain them?"

"Sure, at the big circuses up on the roof of the town. Everybody goes—Airmen, ground men, rich and poor. It's a public works. People wouldn't know what to do without a circus once a week."

underground. He could make it from the surface. Suddenly he felt as if he had a purpose in life—to set foot on the Flying Island that circled the globe.

"If you won't take my money," he said, "let me buy us some lunch."

"How much you got, Blackie? Four thousand six hundred? It won't last

Hugging Peyton, the gorilla drove the sword-point through its solar plexus (Chapter IX)

"I'm going up to the Flying Island some day," Peyton muttered.

"Nobody ever goes up there but Airmen," Hooker snorted. "It's fifteen miles up, I tell you, right in the stratosphere."

Fifteen miles up. Peyton turned the words over in his mind. That was a long climb, but he had made it from

you a week. Better make it just a sandwich. Tonight I'll show you a place where you can sleep for only two hundred."

Peyton stood up and followed him, but he could not forget the black, powerful blotch which was flying steadily above the lofty battlements of New York.

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CHAPTER III

Amusement for Airmen

THE flop-room was as long as a riding gallery and as narrow as a sidewalk. Once, it had been a public alleyway. Now, walled fore and aft, it was furnished with a front office and a lengthy row of open stalls, each containing a cot. Many were occupied by grubby, seedy men. Only one small light glowed near the office.

"I've slept in worse than this," said Peyton as they entered. He remembered the tiny, stuffy cells in the Pit, barred and reeking of disinfectant. "What are you staring at me like that for?"

"You sort of give off light," remarked Gramp.

"Sure," said Peyton. "That's Pit glow. You pick it up smashing atoms."

"Shut up, I want to sleep!" growled the occupant of a nearby cot.

The pair sought adjoining stalls. Peyton removed his shoes and stretched out on the blankets. Gazing up through the dimness, he reviewed his first day of freedom.

The newness of the world was too much for him to straighten out now. More important, probably, was the fact that he was down to first principles. No job, no prospects, mighty little money. Four hundred for breakfast, two hundred for sandwiches, two hundred more for this lodging. That left him forty-two hundred dollars, which might or might not keep body and soul together for five days. Then what? Where and how could a friendless ex-convict hope for help or comfort?

Then, unbidden, came a vision. It was as if the many ceilings slid away from above him and the noonday Sun arose. High in the heaven soared the Flying Island, from which the world's rulers had broadcast that morning and of which Gramp had told him something. There was a goal, the Flying Island!

"I'm going to get up there," he swore to himself. "There must be a way to do it."

He slept.

Two hours later, crashes and clamors rent the quiet. Peyton awoke and sat up. Other occupants of the flop-room ran by the open front of his stall. "Airmen!" cried one. "A grab gang!"

They scampered toward the back of the long chamber. He jammed his feet into his shoes and came to the front of the stall. Gramp was there, caught him by the arm.

"C'mon, Blackie, I waited— Skip it. Too late."

The front door had been kicked in. Men, flashing electric torches, surrounded them. There were six, in khaki-colored tunics, flaring breeches, gleaming boots. Each wore a leather helmet with flaps over the ears and goggles pushed up on the brow. They carried pistols. Their faces were clean, handsome and sneering.

"Well, two of you didn't run," said the tallest man, who seemed to be a leader. "We want men who won't run. Argyle took command today and he wants to run a great show next week."

"Why should I run?" Peyton demanded. "You don't scare me."

"Identification folders," ordered the leader. Gramp produced a doubled piece of card from inside his threadbare coat. The leader studied it. "Huh, charity case, daily dole of five hundred dollars. We can take you. Anybody not in useful or gainful employment can be drafted for public works, and the circus is public works." He turned to Peyton. "Where's your folder?"

"If I had one, I wouldn't give it to you," Peyton snapped.

In the light of the torches, his skin was not glowing. His dark eyes returned his questioner's gaze levelly.

"He don't understand," volunteered Gramp. "He's just out of—"

"Shut up!" rapped the leader. "Even if you had a folder, you can't have much of a job, bunking down here. Not useful or gainful, anyway. And you look like a fighting man to me."

Peyton hunched his shoulders.

"Try it. You'll find out."

"Stand easy!" warned the other sharply. "Try any violence and you won't live long enough to regret it.

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I'm an Airman, you stupid fool."

"Yeah?" said Peyton, unimpressed. "I kind of thought so."

The leader of the Airmen jerked his leather-sheathed head.

"We're a special detail. General Argyle needs chopping blocks for the circus fighters. Come along, both of you. "There's an elevator just outside."

Peyton, emerging from the elevator kiosk under guard, found himself in a park under a starry sky. Lawns, thickets, flower-beds, fountains, noisy open air theaters and game establishments. It seemed similar to other public resorts in the days he had known. Then he realized that all this was flourishing upon a vast roof expanse of the city, miles square and at least a quarter of a mile above ground-level.

"All the closer to the Flying Island," came a satisfying reflection.

Even without a moon, myriad illuminations made the area as bright as day. Gramp, marching beside Peyton, explained that here the rich of New York spent their considerable leisure.

"There are rich people besides Airmen?" asked Peyton.

"Sure. Even Airmen have relatives. Look, there's the circus."

They crossed a lawn to approach a great, squat cylinder of steel and plastic, fully five hundred yards in diameter and jutting eighty yards upward from the roof level.

"Inside it's all a slope," explained Gramp, "with a flat arena in the center, like a crater on the Moon."

They were brought to a door in the cylinder and led into chambers beneath the inner slope. Inside a metal-lined vestibule, the guards met other Airmen.

"Any luck?" the leader inquired. "We found nobody. They ran for their holes like mice. They'd rather watch the show than work in it."

"We got two." The leader of Peyton's captors jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "One's old, but he's still got fire in his eye. Might make sport for a little while. The other'll make more than that."

"Try me," invited Peyton with grim eagerness. "Any of you, bare-handed. Make it any two of you!"

"See?" cried his captor, as though Peyton's challenge gave him the utmost pleasure.

They went into a big enclosure beyond. It smelled like a gymnasium. Two-thirds of its floor was covered with sawdust. Against the wall near the door were attached a set of chest-weights and with these a tall, rugged young man was working. An Airman of about forty, smoking a cigarette in a long holder, and a dazzling young woman, watched the muscle-play of the athlete's arms and back.

"We found these, sir," said Peyton's captor, saluting. "One of them looks usable."

THE older Airman removed the cigarette holder from between his lips and faced Peyton. He had a brown, rectangular face with a short, fierce mustache the color of ginger. His uniform was of expensive fabric and braided with gold at cuffs and shoulders.

"He looks savage enough," he observed. "Don't you think so, Archbold?"

The tall young man turned from his chest-weights.

"A little short and compact, but tough and probably active," he diagnosed with the air of an expert.

Peyton paid no attention to this appraisal of himself, for he had taken time to look at the girl. He forgot that less than twenty-four hours ago he had decided to keep his mind off of women. Here was a glorious blonde, ten years younger than he. Her carefully arranged curls gleamed as with frost and her face was almost as pallid as Peyton's. Her cheek-bones were high. The corners of her green eyes lifted ever so slightly. Her nose and mouth were short and well shaped. A sheathlike dress of bright blue cloth hugged her slim body. She looked like a high-bred, dangerous cat. . . .

"Well," she said to him, "now that you've had a look at me, how do you like me? What's your name?"

"Blackie Peyton," he stated. "And as for how I like you—I do."

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Given a moment, he would be able to forget that he had been brought into her presence as a captive, but the moment was not to be had. The Airman with the gold braid struck at him with an open palm. Peyton ducked under the blow, set himself to hit back. Other Airmen swarmed upon him, pinioning his arms.

"Don't hurt him!" the athlete Archbold said quickly. "He's a fighter. I want to work out with him."

"Suits me," snarled Peyton.

They pushed him to the edge of the sawdust space. From a side door came a burly Negro in trunks and sandals. He was as brown-black as a seal, with a broad, gentle face.

"You let Willie look after you," he said.

With deft hands he removed Peyton's jacket, shirt and undershirt. Meanwhile, Archbold had departed briefly and come back with an armful of clanking metal. He donned a helmet with a visor, a rigid breastplate with chain mail sleeves and brass greaves over his shins.

Peyton had a premonition of bizarre peril. Hadn't they talked about fighting? Didn't that mean boxing?

Archbold had taken up a round shield and a lean, straight sword with a cross-hilt. The forward edge of the sword was rounded and dull, the back sharpened.

"Here, mister."

The big Negro was giving Peyton a similar shield and a sword that was dull on both edges. As Peyton took them, another Airman entered, wearing a badge marked "Police." He pointed at Peyton.

"I want that man," he declared. "He refused assignment to work at the Pardon Board's offices, assaulted a guard—" Then the policeman saw the gold-braided Airman and stiffened to salute. "General Argyle!"

Peyton also looked. So this was Argyle, the man named over the television as governor-chief of New York, who had been kidnaping poor men to use somehow in a circus!

"Wait a second and see some fun," Argyle said. "I'm going to let my star gladiator sweat a bit. Peyton will be his partner. You can take your man later."

Peyton looked again at his opponent, armed with sword and shield. Abruptly it grew clear in his brain. The circus about which everyone talked was the same sort that ancient Rome had run, with swords, blood and death!

"I never shied off from trouble yet," he said to the gladiator. "Come on, let's get busy."

"Good," came the muffled voice of Archbold from behind his visor.

HE fell into a stiff-seeming fencing pose, then licked his sword out. It stung Peyton's cheek.

"One!" counted an Airman.

Archbold was back on guard, fobbing off Peyton's clumsy and fumbling return.

"Fight him, Blackie!" squealed Gramp.

Archbold made another smooth cutting gesture. A sound like a whipstroke, and Peyton stepped away with another welt, this time on his sword-wrist. The big Negro made a sympathetic clucking sound.

"Two!" counted Argyle. "You're splendid today, Archbold."

"I'm beginning to get the idea," Peyton snarled at his opponent. "Maybe I won't be so easy from now on."

Archbold struck.

"Three!" Argyle counted automatically and then said hurriedly: "No! What's the idea, Archbold? Don't let him beat you!"

Peyton had interposed his shield, caught Archbold's blade within inches of his welted cheek and struck in return. The blow made a ringing sound on the mail of Archbold's right biceps. Before the gladiator could whip his sword back, Peyton dashed the metal shield-face hard against Archbold's visored head. Back jerked the helmet and Archbold's sword flew from his hand.

Peyton dropped his own weapons, struck with both fists. Swore as his knuckles bruised on the armor. Archbold tried to club him with the shield edge, but Peyton slipped in close, caught the gladiator around the waist. With a quick trick of his heel

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behind Archbold's calf, he threw him heavily.

"Get them apart!" called someone.

But Peyton had already torn the visor up and was smashing Archbold's distorted features with piston-quick jabs of his right fist. By the time the Airmen had run in and seized him, he had worked both hands up under Archbold's gorget and fastened on the throat beneath it. Archbold made a gobbling sound, then no sound at all.

Dragging with all their strength, the Airmen tore Peyton clear. The tall, armored figure of Archbold lay silent where it had fallen. Willie, the Negro, picked it up and propped it against a wall.

"Bring water," he said anxiously. "Mister Archbold's bad hurt."

The gladiator recovered slowly. His first wild glance was full of terror.

"Keep him away!" he mumbled hoarsely. "He'll kill me!"

"He ought to kill you," growled Argyle. "Get that armor off, Archbold and go back to your delivery truck. You're through."

The policeman moved toward Peyton.

"Shall I take this man now, General?"

"You certainly shan't!" snapped Argyle. "Take your orders back to Headquarters and say that General Argyle countermands them. This man Peyton's pure poison, and he won't be sent away to rot. I'm going to make a star gladiator out of him!"

CHAPTER IV

Thora

A LITTLE room off the gymnasium was fitted with a cot, a surgical chair, shelves of instruments and medical supplies. Peyton leaned against the wall, his pale face counterfeiting boredom as the Negro put neat stitches across a gash in his ribs. Gramp sat in a corner, watching.

"I still don't remember getting that cut," said Peyton.

"Mister Archbold flung his sword and the back was sharp," explained the Negro. "You're lucky you finished him so quick, Mister Blackie."

"Drop the 'mister.' I'm just Blackie Peyton. I always try to finish them quick. What did that fool Argyle mean when he said he'd make a star gladiator out of me?"

"He meant business and he's no fool. General Argyle is lots of things, but fool isn't one of them."

"I've heard of him," seconded Gramp. "He's foolish like an old gray wolf. They say he may be the boss Airman some day, instead of only over New York. Blackie, I never seen anybody as good at assault and battery as you. You'll make a whiz gladiator."

"What did you say your name was?" Peyton asked the Negro.

"Willie Burgoyne."

"You ought to be a good gladiator yourself, Willie. You're quite a hunk of man."

For the first time Willie Burgoyne's sepia face did not look gentle.

"General Argyle started to train me, but I said I wouldn't fight any man unless I was mad at him."

It sounded strange to Peyton. He mused while Willie put on adhesive tape. A gladiator could be famous, popular. It might be a step toward the Flying Island, where he had made up his mind to go.

"I feel different," he said. "I'll fight anybody who craves action. But this Argyle acts like he's used to being obeyed. What happened when you gave him that argument?"

"He slung me into a show, with a grass skirt and a spear, to fight a lion."

Gramp whistled. "I seen it from the public bleachers. Argyle was only circus chief then, ranking colonel. He was fixing for you to be killed, huh? But you killed the lion instead."

"Yes," admitted Willie modestly. "Since then they've used me against lots of animals, but no men. I stick to that. Stand easy, Mister Blackie. You'll be all right in a few days."

Peyton wriggled gingerly into his shirt.

"Cut out the 'mister.' Gramp, you didn't tell me everything. You didn't say much about the Airmen, and noth-

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ing at all about the circus here."

Gramp had found some medicinal liquor in a bottle. He poured drinks into three beakers.

"Drink up," he invited. "Blackie, the circus is rough stuff. Man against man, man against beast, single or in gangs. Lots of blood, plenty of deaths. Nothing like when you were a kid—box-fights, wrestling matches."

"It may be like this," put in Willie's soft voice. "Things don't always please folks. They crave action. Maybe they get it by watching circus fighters."

"Sure," agreed Peyton. "That was the Roman idea. Bread and circuses when the people got jumpy or questioning. Sounds as if the Airmen had trouble with the ground people and had to give 'em shows to sweeten 'em up."

"If General Argyle heard you talk like that—" Gramp began to warn.

"You call Argyle a general, but I heard about somebody called Marshal Torridge," said Peyton.

"He's the boss Airman, never comes down off that Flying Island. There's lots of generals—one, I guess, for every city. Every Airman, as soon as he's born, ranks a captain. He grows up and he's a major or a colonel. Military rule."

ONCE more the Flying Island soared into Peyton's mind.

"This Flying Island their home?" he asked.

"Headquarters," Gramp replied, "the place that keeps watch over the world. Most of the Airmen are governing the cities, the way I hear it. Don't ask me any more what goes on up on the Flying Island. Airmen don't confide in me."

"They don't confide in anybody," added Willie. "All we folks on the ground do is obey orders, give them what they need to live like kings, salute them when they notice us. You make 'em mad, Mister Blackie, when you don't do that." He looked grim. "Takes a lot of salutes to satisfy twenty thousand Airmen."

Peyton stopped knotting his necktie.

"Twenty thousand?" he repeated. "There must be millions of ordinary people in this town, and millions more in the others. That's enough to swallow twenty thousand for breakfast and stop all the salutes and circuses."

"Not when the twenty thousand have all the guns and planes," reminded Gramp.

The door opened before Peyton could think of a reply. General Argyle came in. The blond girl looked over his shoulder.

"How is he?" Argyle asked Willie.

The great black body straightened. A broad hand flashed upward in salute.

"He'll be well in a week, General."

"Ready for circus after next," decided Argyle. "Come along, Peyton. There's a tailor waiting to see you."

"Tailor?" echoed Peyton, not understanding.

He followed the general to another room and understood still less as a deft, soft man measured him quickly and promised delivery by nightfall of several suits of clothes.

"What is this?" Peyton protested to the general. "I didn't order any clothes and I haven't much money."

"Leave that to me," Argyle told him. "I can't have you looking like a tramp."

He was the man who had sent away a policeman pursuing Peyton, who would give him work, clothes, money and fame, might even get him to the Flying Island, yet Peyton could not like him.

"What do you care how I look?" Peyton challenged bluntly.

Argyle said nothing. The girl smiled tigerishly and went to a radio that was set flush in the wall, like a safe. She twisted a dial.

"It's all over town, folks," a newscasting voice snapped, "the treat that's coming when General Argyle celebrates his New York promotion at the circus next week! Seems he's been training a surprise scrapper in secret. Blackie Peyton's the name, and they say you'll all be knowing it. In a private tryout, he mopped up 'Slasher' Archbold, put him clear out of the circus business—"

She turned it off.

"You're a celebrity now, Blackie."

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He nodded dumbly. They were giving him a build-up, but could he make good on it?

"Publicity's already started," General Argyle amplified. "You've got to be seen in public, too. I'm taking you out tonight when your new clothes arrive—you and Thora here."

"You?"

Peyton turned and looked at the blonde. She smiled.

"Certainly. I'm here to help make you a public personality. I used to be seen with Archbold and did him justice. Now I'll be seen with you. Strictly business."

"What else would it be but strictly business?" Argyle demanded.

An inverted smile crinkled Peyton's savage face.

"Sure, what else?" he agreed.

THE pleasure garden called Brockenburg's was not greatly different from the night clubs of twenty years before. Its vogue was in great part due to its recapturing of an archaic flavor. Tables and chairs had silver-surfaced legs of iron, seats and tops of red and green enamel. There was a bar of imitation mahogany, behind which stood bartenders in old-fashioned white coats, with hair clipped close to their temples and slicked down on top.

Behind the bar was a mirror, against which stood shelves and shelves of bottles. The bottles and the imitation beer pumps, however, were only for show. Drinks, as ordered, were whipped along on conveyor belts just under the bar.

In a cleared space among the tables cavorted a dancing chorus of girls. A singer heartily bawled out a rendition of "Begin the Beguine," one of the best of the old songs. Its pumped-up avowals of passion were hailed as screamingly funny by the audience.

At a choice table, near the music and the entertainment, sat General Argyle, resplendent in a white-and-gold uniform. He wore a monocle and a platinum bracelet. Numerous persons, city-dwellers in evening attire and lesser Airmen in uniform, came to him to pay flattering court.

"Meet Blackie Peyton," he kept saying, gesturing toward his companion, a heavy-jawed, pallid man in beautifully fitting dinner clothes of midnight blue. "Greatest natural killer in history. See him week after next at the circus. He'll dazzle you."

Peyton greeted stranger after stranger with his best pretense of cordiality.

"Glad to meet you. Thanks for coming over."

Thora, the blonde, smiled above a fan of blue spun glass during a visitorless interlude.

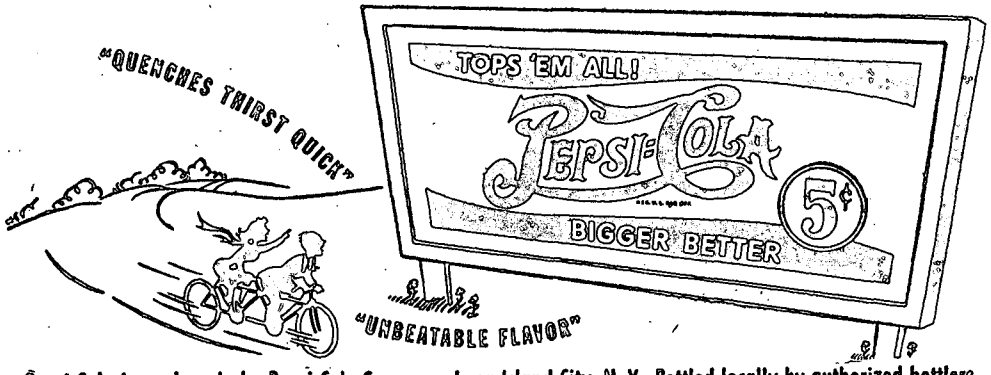
"I must say that you act quite like a gentleman, after all," she told Peyton.

"I always was a good actor," he replied, "but don't be deceived."

She seemed to like that.

The singer and the dancers made their exit. Music began—drums and wooden pipes that squealed like captive elephants. A door opened and great green shapes came springing

[*Turn page*]



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through. Peyton stared, half-fascinated and disgusted.

"Those *are* frogs," Thora informed him, as if reading his mind.

"They're as big as men!" he protested.

"Yes, and almost as smart. Scientists—Airmen have endowed plenty of them—did it with natural selection, growth rays, environment. Quite successful."

A trainer appeared, cracking a whip. The frogs hopped over each other, wrestled clumsily, finally croaked out a semi-tuneful chorus of "Oh, Susanna." Peyton scowled, revolted by all this trouble to furnish trick animals, when real tobacco and coffee were not to be had. Well, he reflected, entertainment was something the Airmen insisted on. Grim entertainment was furnishing him with a living, keeping him out of police hands, might elevate him at last to the Flying Island. Meanwhile, Thora sat beside him.

"How about a flight over the city?" Argyle asked them.

Thora smiled politely. Peyton nodded, trying to disguise his thrilled anticipation.

LEAVING Brockenburg's, they walked through gravel-pathed shrubbery to a landing field surfaced in concrete. From a cubical hangar, attendants pushed a plane. It was a winged torpedo, no more than twelve feet long and three in diameter. Two seats rode midway in the metal fusilage, one up by the controls.

"I'll be operating," Argyle informed Peyton and Thora as he arranged a dome of glass to cover them. "I must order you to keep your eyes on the view. It's interesting. Besides, only Airmen are to have anything to do with aircraft operation. Is that clear, Peyton?"

"Yes, sir."

Argyle went to his controls. The atomic motor hissed gently. They soared upward like a skyward shell. The full Moon had suddenly come up. They rose as if to meet it.

Below them, the city of New York resembled a single, rambling house with many lean-tos, annexes and ells. In the upper levels it was partially open here and there, revealing bits of travelways and squares. Lighted ports and windows showed on the outer walls. The parks of the vast roof gleamed with many jewel lights. It was so beautiful and bewildering that Peyton despaired of ever coming to know the complexity of New York.

Washed by the moonglow stretched flat plains, mostly under cultivation, dotted here and there with smaller sheds and houses. Rivers of silver—the Hudson and the East River—wound in and out under the city's mighty foundations. More distantly, closing in around the cultivated ground, were dark fluffs of woodland. Somewhere to the north would be the ruins of the town Peyton had come from, the bones of all the people he had known. . . .

Well, he had one friend, Gramp Hooker. He had asked General Argyle to give Gramp a job as gladiator's helper. There was Willie, too. Peyton liked the Negro, who was so gentle, yet so self-assured, who would be the best helper and most dangerous adversary he could think of. Yes, and there was Thora.

"Aren't you thrilled?" she asked.

He smiled. His mouth-corners turned up this time, made his face look cheerful and quite young.

"I'm bored stiff," he said.

They both laughed. General Argyle heard them above the softly hissing motor and turned to study them in unsympathetic wonder.

CHAPTER V

Circus Day

GRAMP and Willie were helping Peyton into his gladiatorial costume in a small dressing room just inside the performers' passage to the circus stadium. Through the closed door resounded a muffled commotion of voices, scuffling feet and band music.

"Show's about to begin," announced Gramp, giving the gilt sandals on the table a final rub. "Say, Blackie, I don't

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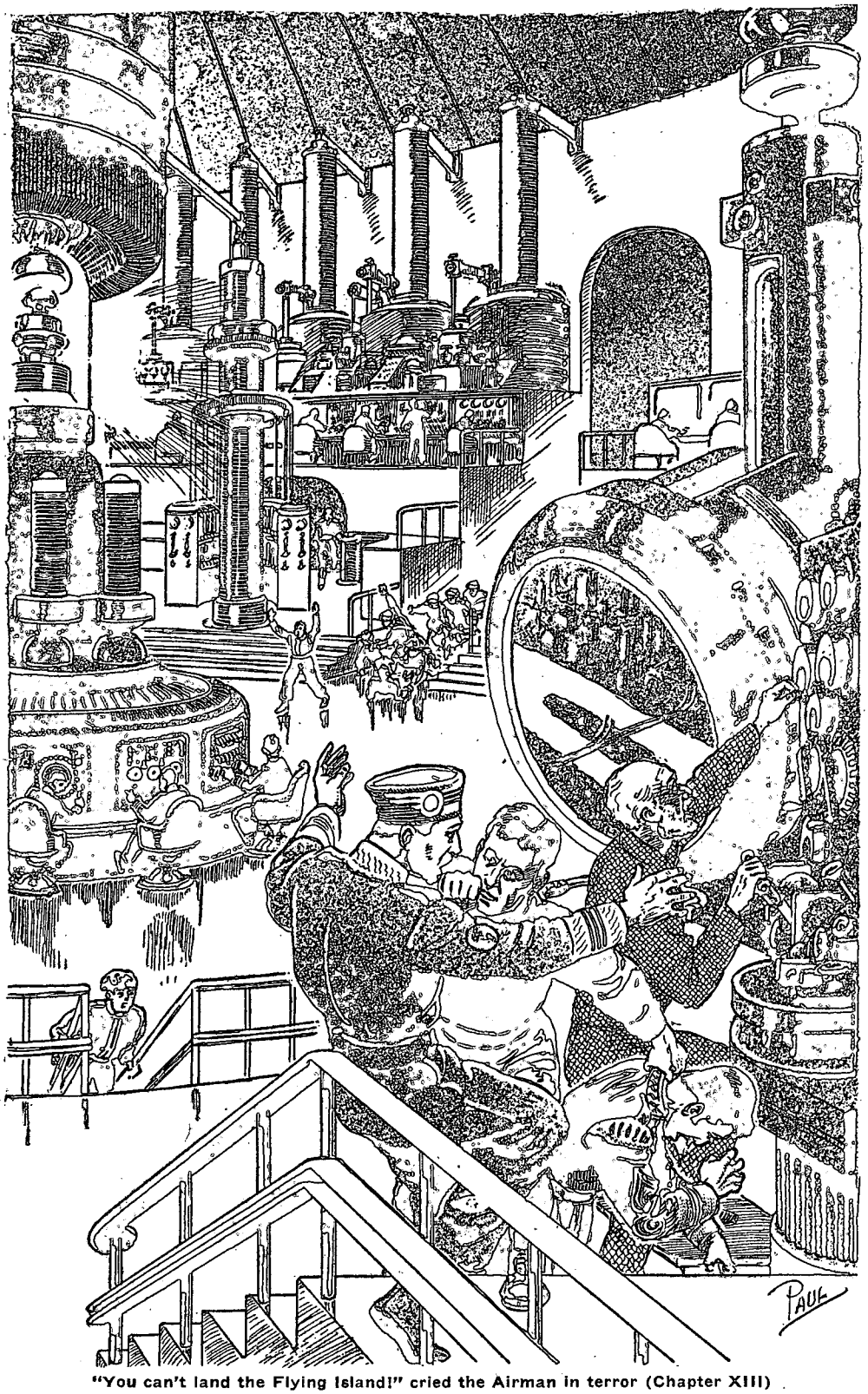

"You can't land the Flying Island!" cried the Airman in terror (Chapter XIII)

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know whether or not I ought to thank you for giving me a job as your dresser. Before that I got five hundred a day, charity, just for being too old to work."

"Are you?" asked Peyton. To Willie he said: "I wish you didn't have to put that red sash on me. It makes me feel like Lord Fauntleroy."

"It looks good, Mister Blackie, and you don't fence like Lord Fauntleroy. You gave me a real workout yesterday."

"Drop the 'mister,' I've told you a hundred times. Gramp, what did you do before you grizzled up?"

Gramp brought him the sandals.

"I was an Airman. Yep, I mean that. One of the old-fashioned kind. Ace in the First World War, instructor at Montreal in the Second. Too old, of course, for the Third, or I might be one of the high monkey-monks up there on the Flying Island. As I stand, I'm just eighty-two and I don't feel a day over eighty-one."

"Eighty-two," repeated Willie. His manganese-colored palms smoothed the fine chain mail shirt on Peyton's chest and shoulders, passed gently over the bandaged side. "Weren't you kind of young for the First World War, Mister Gramp?"

"Don't you 'mister' me, neither. Yep, I was young, but I went. They took 'em young for the air force then. Stick up your foot, Blackie. How do these sandals look?"

Peyton gazed into a full-length mirror as Willie set a plumed helmet on his head and draped a flame-hued mantle on his back and over one arm. His bare legs were cross-gartered and a jeweled belt clasped his narrow waist. His pale skin, where it showed, had been skilfully stained a healthy brown.

"What a male Lucille!" he commented sourly.

"Not fighting clothes exactly," agreed Willie in his gentle voice as he donned his own more serviceable breastplate and strapped a sheathed sword at his left hip. "But you're just going to be in the parade to get introduced for next time. Be sure to watch my act. They've got some kind of novelty animal for me to fight. I wonder what it really could be."

Over his naked shoulder he swung a quiver of arrows and reached for a long hickory bow in a corner.

"I'll watch," promised Peyton. "After the introduction, I sit in the general's box with Thora and some other silky people."

"Yah!" jeered Gramp. "I was in the Roof Park and I spotted you riding around with that Thora girl. If I was thirty years younger, I'd gnaw under you and get her away."

His grizzled beard bunched with a teasing grin.

"It's all business," Peyton said. "She keeps saying that herself."

Someone knocked on the door.

"Three minutes, gentlemen! Parade now forming!"

WILLIE and Peyton emerged side by side. Just within the great, curtained doorway to the arena, the performers were being marshaled. At the crisp order of an Airman overseer, Willie fell in beside a towering blond gladiator in a cloak fringed with lion's fur. Others formed up behind them. Dancing girls, laughing and fussing with their flowing costumes, formed a graceful cloud. There were tractor-drawn cages full of beasts.

"Up here, Peyton!" called the overseer.

The attendants led forward a giant elephant with shining trappings. Peyton climbed up a ladder to a howdah.

The music blared louder, the curtains twitched away, and applause shook the noonday sky as the parade swung into the open. Peyton found the swaying elephant ride pleasant. He looked at the far-reaching slopes of the stadium, upon which fully three hundred thousand were crowded. The faces he could make out looked rapt, greedy for excitement. Around the lower rim, behind barred parapets, sat the rich of New York, including many Airmen. He spotted General Argyle, Thora and others in a choice box. They applauded him as the elephant lumbered past.

The parade, led by a rider on a white horse, executed a circuit of the arena,

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a cut-across and finally halted, saluting to the peal of a fanfare. A microphone sprouted from a trap-door, rising on a metal stalk. The mounted leader addressed the stadium through loudspeakers, booming out greetings, program announcements, promises of thrills. Finally:

"It is my privilege and pleasure to introduce a performer who will be in action next week. Blackie Peyton, protégé of General Argyle!"

"Stand up," the overseer in the howdah bade Peyton.

Peyton did so. A searchlight rested blindingly upon him. On impulse he mitted himself to the crowd, boxer fashion. They thundered approval of him. He sat down, feeling sick from the glare.

"That was to amplify you for a televise," the overseer said. "They all got a glimpse of you. Now they're hungry to see the color of your blood."

The parade ambled back through the main doorway. Dismounting, Peyton followed a fawning usher along a passageway to a small door. Through this he stepped into the box of General Argyle.

The general shook hands with theatrical cordiality, introduced him to a dozen groomed and scented guests. Then he paused, for the moment of noon was at hand. Into view against the Sun came the vast cushion-shaped shadow of the Flying Island. From it seemed to gush a beam, straight down upon the arena.

"Television message," whispered someone.

A cloud was forming above the sand. In its midst, as in a clairvoyant's crystal, was a radiant, flashing glimpse of a city, all golden spires and rainbow bubbles, the personification of a paradise.

"That," whispered the someone beside Peyton, "is how the Flying Island must look."

Then the vision melted into a colossal reflection of a man's head and shoulders. It was Marshal Torridge, whom Peyton had seen televised once before.

"People of New York, I regret that I can be with you only in image. My best wishes to you and to General Argyle, your new commander. Enjoy the great circus which is now spread for your delectation."

The beam was gone and the dark patch slid away from the Sun. Peyton gazed after it. Had he truly seen what it was like, or had he yet to find out?

"You look magnificent in that costume," Thora, beside him, was saying. "How do you feel?"

"Silly."

The man who had whispered spoke from the other side.

"You and I are artists, Peyton—you of swords, I of words."

PEYTON turned and looked. The man was a few years younger than he, slender and artificial in chocolate brown. His tawny hair seemed to be skilfully curled.

"My name is Bengali," he said. "I am a poet, recite twice a week over the radio. I may be inspired by you to a really fine set of verses."

He leaned back in his chair and fixed his blue eyes on the vault of the sky. He began to speak measuredly, as though he read words written up there.

> Across the smooth and sanded floor
> Advanced, to high applause,
> A swarthy hero, armed for war. . . .

"Work in a lion's claws," suggested Peyton. "They've got cages and cages of lions." To Thora he said: "I heard that there's no trade to bring us real coffee or tobacco. How do they get lions and elephants to New York?"

She made no reply, for just then the show began. The dancing girls capered forth in a really graceful ballet, stopped in the middle of a tableau with shrieks. They broke into wild flight.

A monstrous rhinoceros, goaded from its pen, galloped after them in swift, clumsy rage. Head down, it almost caught the slowest of the girls on its horn, which had been stained black and highly polished to set off blood.

She reached the wall and someone in a box helped her to safety.

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Alone, the armored monster lumbered around on the sand. Its dinosaur head, survival of a past age, tossed and swayed. It squealed and snorted like a mad stallion.

A shrill whistle blew from across the sand. Another small portal opened and Willie Burgoyne emerged. He was greeted with yells and cheers from the spectators, many of whom called him by name. The rhinoceros, too, faced that way. It peered like a short-sighted old man. Willie advanced at a trot, the strung bow in his left hand, with an arrow laid across.

The beast charged him, ungainly as a hog, swift as an antelope. Willie stood still. That deadly downflung plow of a horn slashed almost at his feet when he took a long, smooth stride to the left.

As the bulk of his adversary blundered by, he set the head of his arrow and released his string. The whole stadium, abruptly silent, heard the *twang*. Willie took long backward steps toward the center of the arena, while the wounded rhinoceros buck-jumped awkwardly in pain. It came at him again, more slowly than before.

"Magnificent!" murmured Bengali, the poet. "It is the legend of the unicorn's hunting, enacted before our eyes. But of course," he added with pedantic superiority, "only a maiden, pure and beautiful and snow-white, can destroy the unicorn."

"Yeah?" said Peyton. "Well, my money rides on that dark lad out there to win. Want to bet?"

Nobody accepted the challenge.

AS the rhinoceros drew near the second time, Willie again stepped aside. He set a swift, black hand on the shoulder-hump of the beast and vaulted easily upon its back. The rhinoceros stopped, as though powerful brakes had been applied. Willie dropped his bow and whipped out his straight sword. His free forefinger touched a point behind the left shoulder, then his weapon drove in to the hilt. He dismounted with an airy leap, ran several steps away, turned his back and bowed with a graceful flourish.

The rhinoceros collapsed and died behind him.

Howls and hurrahs rang out. Willie made his exit and a midget tractor waddled forth to haul away the carcass. Attendants threw sand on the blood splotches.

A horseman rode forth, dressed as a cowboy of the earlier twentieth century. He waved his hands to the applauding multitude and reined in to look for his foe. It appeared from a door opposite—a bison bull, almost as large as the rhinoceros and fully as intent on destruction.

Head low, shaggy hump high, it hurled itself at the cowboy.

"I thought those things were extinct," said Peyton.

"There are great herds reported out West," volunteered Bengali. He patted a yawn with his beringed right hand, then sat up abruptly. "Oh, this is delicious!"

His approval was for the sudden victory of the bison bull. The cowboy had skillfully spread a lariat, whirling it around his head. He launched it at the oncoming bison, settling it down over the black bulk and rearing back quickly. The noose, given a second's opportunity, would have tightened around all four feet. But the bison, by chance or cunning, leaped high at that moment. The noose flickered away without catching.

A moment later the two curved horns had dipped under the belly of the horse, lifting it and hurling it ten yards away. The crowd was yelling, but not loud enough to drown the shrill scream of the gored horse. The man fell beside his floundering mount, plowing the sand with his face. He got to his hands and knees, then to his feet. He ran staggeringly.

Spinning on its bunched toes, as a cat spins, the bull leaped, tossed him like an empty sack. He fell heavily. The horns scooped him up and tossed him again. The Sun illuminated his flying body, picking out the bright crimson of blood.

Another figure sped forth, a gladiator in the costume of a clown. As the bison prodded the prone cowboy for a third time, this newcomer caught

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and pulled the corkscrew tail. The beast left its victim and the gaily dressed clown ran comically before it. There was loud laughter on all sides.

As they shot past another door, Willie Burgoyne stepped out and launched a quick arrow. The bison somersaulted and lay kicking. The applause was like spring thunder.

"STILL bored?" Thora asked Peyton.

He shook his head bleakly.

"Many people are frightened at their first circus," said Argyle.

"Not me," replied Peyton. "Only sick to my stomach."

Everybody in the box turned and stared. Peyton did not care. He had spoken the truth.

Riches, expense, lavishness, a morbid mess of thrills for these New Yorkers who were kept pent up in their great box of a city! The Airmen, with their flying craft, could import rhinoceros and buffalo, but not coffee and tobacco. The Pit had been a better prison, because it did not pretend to be anything else.

The warden had said that the world was changed. He should have said that the world had reverted to barbarism.

The Flying Island, though, might be different.

CHAPTER VI

Slumming

GRAMP waited for Peyton in the dressing room. Willie had already changed and sought his living quarters nearby.

"You look like an advance agent for the Fourth World War," Gramp said. "What made you mad?"

Peyton scowled still blacker.

"Didn't you see that poor cowpoke?"

"If you're going to be a gladiator, you'd better get used to blood."

It was a new thought. Peyton mulled it over while he doffed his dress armor.

"Things are changed, all right, for the worse." He dropped his cloak on the dressing table. "I ought to go out and get drunk."

Gramp looked up from unstrapping the sandals.

"Can you scrounge a holiday from that blond peril?"

"Thora? Sure. That's just part of my work, anyway."

"Nice work if you can get it," commented Gramp tritely. "Come with me tonight down to the Underways."

"Underways?" repeated Peyton blankly.

"What used to be slums. We'll have fun."

"General Argyle gave me only thirty thousand dollars yesterday for pin money."

"It's a fortune in the Underways. Scrub off that pretty suntan paint and wear your old clothes."

The covered, murkily lighted street they came to was fenced with mighty concrete pilings instead of buildings. Glancing between these, Peyton saw other pilings of wood, plastic or cement, like the trunks of a dismal forest. Only a few buildings lined the streets. Traffic was made up of pedestrians, mostly heavy-laden. Some carried huge parcels. Others balanced baskets on pole-ends, like Chinese coolies. Peyton saw no vehicles at all.

"And you say lots of people live down here?" he demanded of Gramp. "What for?"

"Because they're made to. Somebody has to look after all these piles and braces."

Peyton paused and stared through the seemingly endless thickets of upright columns. It was a dismal view.

"This is the basement of New York," continued Gramp. "With all the weight that's on these supports, they need to be repaired, or replaced, or guy-wired, or strengthened all the time. So most of the poor people—like me, before I got too old for it—are down here, slaving and messing around. Naturally they live down here."

"Naturally?"

Gramp smiled fiercely in his beard.

"Another thing the Airmen figured out. Ain't they the clever ones? If the boys who keep the town braced

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up live down here, they'll do the job well. They'll be crushed first and flattest by any slip. . . . In here, Blackie."

Among the pilings stood a slovenly shack. They went in through an atmosphere rank with synthetic tobacco fumes. There was a bar, a fly-specked mirror, a throng of shabby men, mostly old. They all drank industriously. One or two hailed Gramp by name. He hailed back and steered Peyton to a free space against the bar.

"Tony," he said to the bartender, "my pal Blackie will buy some beer."

PEYTON laid down a five-hundred-dollar bill.

"Have something yourself," he invited the bartender. "Here's looking, Gramp." He lifted his glass. "I like this place. No fluff and no Airmen."

"Most of these guys work at propping up the town," explained Gramp. "The older ones are charity dolers, like me. Most of them are good eggs, done a job or two in their lives."

"We have that," assured a nearby oldster with a hooked nose. "Me, I was a sailor when I was a boy. Huh! Who sails now?"

"The Airmen," replied Peyton. "They sail through the air with the greatest racket of all time. Have a beer, sailor."

The old tar dipped his beak into the drink.

"None of us like the Airmen down here and they kind of keep out of our way. Pilings have been known to fall on snoopers."

Peyton drank, too.

"This beer's not synthetic, anyway. Boys, you sound like you're boiling up a poor man's fight against the Airmen."

He wondered if he was talking too much, but Gramp's rejoinder was frank enough to reassure him.

"It's every man's fight, Blackie. Everybody suffers. They tax the rich and work the poor. Nobody really has much to lose."

"If this talk got back to General Argyle—" mused Peyton.

"If it did," grimly interrupted the sailor, "somebody might stick a knife into you and walk it all the way around you. Remember that before you sing to any Airmen."

"None of that talk, Sailor," Gramp cautioned. "Blackie's square. I wouldn't be training with him if he wasn't."

"More beer," said Peyton.

When they had had their second round, Gramp put his beard close to Peyton's ear.

"Follow me," he whispered.

He led to the back of the room. There was a door marked "Kitchen." They entered a room where a red-faced cook boiled ham and cabbage, passed through a door marked "Pantry," a dark passage beyond. Peyton's Pitglow face lighted them to a third door, where Gramp knocked four times.

"Joe Hooker," he called.

An automatic lock buzzed and the door swung wide. They came into a small, bare, windowless room. A man looked up from behind a battered desk. He was lean and had tawny hair that was artificially curled.

"Say," exclaimed Peyton, stopping. "Aren't you Bengali, the radio poet?"

"Stand easy," invited Bengali in a voice unlike his affected tones at the circus. "The Airmen figured me for a fool. I want them to. But I was there to observe you, decide if Gramp Hooker was right when he said you might be useful to us."

Peyton rested his knuckles on the desk top.

"What are you?"

"Chief of council for the Committee against the Airmen."

Peyton relaxed. "Oh, revolution."

"Not exactly. Revolution implies something new. We want only the old. The days before Nineteen Sixty weren't perfect, but they were free, better than this. You admit as much. You don't like the Airmen."

"Being an Airman is being expert at a certain job," said Peyton. "I don't squawk about anybody who does his job right. But when a bunch of high-class mechanics begins to push itself on top of everybody and roosts up there, playing God—"

He broke off. Again he feared he was talking too much.

"That's putting it clearly," stated

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Bengali. "The war ended with peace in the hands of Airmen throughout the world. They organized, holding all the arms and authority. Nobody could give them an argument. The terms sounded wonderful. No more war. All weapons to remain in the hands of an international governing class. Dole benefits for the aged and work for poor. Taxes on the rich. Production and other activity to be supervised. All to be run by the men best fitted by service and training for the job of ruling. How does that sound?"

"Perfect," replied Peyton, "but it isn't working out."

BENGALI nodded. "Exactly. If the Airmen had played the game square above the board, this would be heaven. They played it crooked, to get power and gain for themsevles, and it's purgatory. And they themselves aren't pleased, either."

"Not pleased?" blurted Peyton. "That's hard to understand."

Bengali paused to clarify the idea. "There are just a few of them and so many of us, they need that great Flying Island to keep spinning around Earth to keep a weather eye on everything. Population centers like this—everybody crowded together, with no scattered rural subcenters and wild country where outlaws might escape to—helps simplify the problem, but not too much.

"Twently thousand Airmen have to keep busy. Most of them are stationed at the various towns, policing, supervising and governing. And the ones who began it, after twenty years, aren't so young and brash and energetic any more. They want to relax, take a vacation. They don't dare. The younger Airmen, chafing to take their places, might step in."

"You sound sure," commented Peyton.

"I can even give you names. General Argyle, a very able man, has been put in command of New York. He's not satisfied. He wants to be marshal, master of everything, in the place of Torridge up there on the Island." Bengali smiled again, as though there were a happy side to what he said. "If the Airmen fall out among themselves, we who are planning against them can do something."

"Let me think a moment," Peyton pleaded.

He had no doubt that Bengali, traveling in high circles and low, could be pretty sure of his facts. The Airmen had their work cut out for them, governing the world. A split would mean dissent, reduction of numbers, diverting of attention. A strong move on the part of the ground folk might have an effect, but if only the poor and old and overworked were in that movement—

Bengali read that thought.

"I have headquarters and allies down here, because these people have more desperation and hope of gain than anybody. I don't trust many of the rich. My set-up there is no more than a skeleton."

Peyton felt that Bengali, no matter how smart, was slipping. How could these cellar-prowlers fight against the Airmen, armed and winged and with the Flying Island? Atomic energy as fuel and exposive was imperative. The whole city of New York could be blasted away. Probably he, Peyton, was lucky to be finding this out. He could use such knowledge.

Gramp entered the conversation.

"You see, Blackie, I'm not just a hungry old coot. Nobody bothers about me, but I can get around. I can study a man like you—strong, smart, dissatisfied, with special knowledge—and figure a way to use him."

"Special knowledge?" repeated Peyton. "You mean atomic energy? I know only a little about it."

"That little is more than we know," Bengali said.

"But I just wrestled the machines. Of course I know how to handle it, in those containers made of inerton—"

"Inerton!" exclaimed Bengali. "That leadlike metal mined way down below? It's the first I ever heard—ah, now I see why our mechanics are on the right track, making motors that can use the atomic! You're wrong, Peyton. You can help us a lot. The prison is run by the most faithful jackals the Airmen have. No news

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ever comes out of it, about atomic or anything else."

IN other words, Peyton summed up in his mind, his own limited knowledge and the considerable labored guesswork of Bengali's companions might add up to something. His earlier intuition was right. He would be fortunate to know and observe two powers lining up for conflict. He could choose, in good time, the winner. Perhaps he could save to that winning side the few people he liked in this insane world—Gramp, Willie, even Thora.

Among other things, the Flying Island would belong to the victor. To go there, high above Earth and close to the Sun and stars, forget the bustle and the strangeness— He hoped he was not getting a foolish, glamorized dream stuck in his system.

"Are you in with us, Peyton?" Bengali was asking.

"Of course." Peyton smiled cheerfully, his mouth-corners up instead of down. "If I'd said no, what would have happened to me?"

Neither man made verbal reply, but Gramp shut a big claspknife with a loud *snap*. Peyton turned and looked.

"I didn't see that toad-sticker."

"Sure you didn't," agreed Gramp. "I was holding it behind your back, with the point about an inch from the place where your shoulders come together. Just one little shove and you'd never have got out to Tony's bar to finish the drinks you paid for."

CHAPTER VII

Astride the Fence

AT a central point on the vast roof-level, apart from the parks and pleasure grounds, were assembled great ranks and formations of open troughs and tubs. Each was kept filled with water, which trickled in through pipes at a rate that exactly balanced evaporation. Other pipes brought in carefully measured solutions of various mineral salts. The troughs and tubs were covered with coarse wire screens, which supported the close-set stems of tomatoes, green corn, beans, peas. This was New York's truck garden.

Farming thus intensively and artificially, agriculture experts produced large and edible, if not exactly flavorful specimens enough for the millions. A tank, a few bucketsful of the proper chemicals, produced a volume of vegetables that once needed acres. "Bathtub farming," half a joke in 1940, was a bountiful enterprise in 1980.

Many came to look. None bothered about the Flying Island that came overhead, with one exception.

Blackie Peyton sat among flowering shrubs at the edge of the chemical garden, leaning back with his face turned up. His skin was becoming faintly ruddy and he could see without his dark spectacles. The clothes he wore were expensive and well cut. Only his thoughts set him aside from the regiments of strolling Upper Towners in the parks, gardens and malls of New York's rooftop.

The Flying Island! Peyton, seeing it block away the Sun, remembered again the vision he had seen so briefly of gleaming towers and rainbow chambers. That and the face and figure of Marshal Torridge were new and thrilling. Everyone else was used to the Flying Island, though nobody ever took it for granted. That symbol of power, he knew, was an influence on every life from which it blocked away the noonday Sun.

He remembered what Bengali had said to him in that little denlike office behind the bar in the prop-forest of New York's lowest level. The Airmen had the world by the neck and the seat of the pants. Ground people, here and in other places, did the work, the producing. The Airmen governed ably, so that the people would prosper and be profitable.

Though few in number, the Airmen had all the weapons and held all the strings. Normally, even if all New York's millions rebelled in a chunk, there wouldn't be a chance of victory against guns and bombs and atomic planes overhead.

Bengali's hope was in the struggle

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between Argyle and Torridge. Torridge commanded, but he was tired and aging. Argyle was ambitious, shrewd, influential. A division of the Airmen might give Bengali's crowd—he called it a committee, but there seemed to be thousands, at least—a chance to pull off something, especially since neither Argyle nor Torridge had any idea of a possible uprising.

But what if Peyton told? There probably was some way to get word to Torridge of what was up. He might even be called up yonder to give information. Surely the boss Airman, in possession of the facts, could put an end to both Argyle and Bengali. And there would be Peyton, up on the Flying Island, circling the world, one of the right-hand men of Marshal Torridge!

"It isn't my fight, either way," he told himself. "I was put in jail by a world that doesn't exist. All this business happened without me. I can treat myself honestly, do what's best for me, because I owe nobody anything. Shakespeare or somebody said you ought to be true to yourself."

BUT his nature was not one that admired betrayal. And as to being friendless and debtless, he couldn't cross off Gramp or Willie. No, nor Thora. Did she really like him? Was her kindly conversation strictly business?

As if evoked by the thought, her voice came to him.

"Imagine meeting like this, Mr. Peyton! You're getting a wonderful outdoor color."

She sat down beside him on the bench. She wore slacks and a metallically gleaming sweater, in the prevailing mode among smart women.

"Thanks," he said. "Just you stay fair."

"I think white skin's becoming to a blonde," she replied carelessly. "Almost all women try to tan. I thought I'd do the opposite and be a standout."

"You'd always be a standout, Thora, in any crowd."

"Thank you, sir." She smiled.

The Flying Island slid over and away from the Sun. Both of them gazed after it.

"I wonder what that place is like," mused Peyton. "Ever been up there, Thora?"

"I? No. Women aren't allowed. Not even the Airmen's wives, and they always marry into the families of rich or influential ground people. But the Airwomen—some call them that—live here in the rich levels, or sometimes on resorts at the edge of the cultivated part. Marshal Torridge doesn't want any women up there."

"I suppose," he said," that you've had plenty of chances to marry Airmen."

"Not me." She laughed it away. "I have no money. They feel that they should get as close to the ground aristocracy as possible."

"Is it that," asked Peyton, "or do they want members of those important families for hostages in case of trouble?"

"You ask dangerous questions, Mr. Peyton. What gives you the idea there might be trouble?"

He saw that he had made a near-error and strove to change the subject.

"I don't let Willie Burgoyne mister me. Don't you do it, either. My name to my friends is Blackie."

"Thank you." Thora smiled again. "I do want you to be a friend of mine. But Blackie sounds so—so deadly. What's your real name?"

"Pierce."

"It sounds sharp." She turned to him on the bench, her face grave. "Pierce, I want to warn you. Don't question the Airmen or block them. You'll be destroyed utterly and I'd hate to see that."

"That's very nice-sounding, coming from you. I figured you were practically one of them."

Again she shook her blond head.

"I only work for them. General Argyle, being in a line of endeavor that demands show and notice, values me as a good ornament for certain uses. For instance, I'm not exactly shabby as somebody to take you around and publicize you. Naturally I have loyalty to my employers, but I was born poor, here in New York.

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I belong on the ground. Probably I'll stay on the ground. And I'm not trying to frighten you with my warnings. I only want to help."

"I believe that." Peyton smiled with his mouth-corners up. "You know, I said that not much pleased me here. That doesn't include you, Thora."

"Thank you," she told him once more. "Shall we walk around? People will be interested in seeing you. It's good publicity for the next show."

WILLIE BURGOYNE and Peyton were working out in the gymnasium. Only Gramp was present to watch. Armorless, with shields and blunted swords, the two gladiators fenced and foined enthusiastically. Once Willie yelled as Peyton's blunt edge struck him on the elbow. Finally Gramp called time and they stood back from each other, panting a little. Willie put down his shield and sword.

"You're too good for me, Mister Blackie."

"Stop that mister and don't razz me. You're pulling your punches."

"It's you who pulls punches. You're not in earnest."

"Nobody can be in dead earnest unless it's a real fight for blood," Peyton declared.

The three went out of the gymnasium and down a corridor toward their living quarters. As they passed one of the stadium offices, the door opened. Out came an Airman, who wore a holstered pistol and a police badge. By the arm he led a seedy, gray man with a hooked nose. The captive turned his face quickly away from the three, but Gramp started and cursed behind the curtain of his beard. As they strode in an opposite direction from the Airman and his charge, Gramp whispered to Peyton, so Willie could not hear.

"You know that old guy, Blackie—the one with the Airman?"

"Why should I know him? I meet people all the time and can't remember ten per cent of them."

"It was the sailor. You know, the man we drank with at the bar."

"That so?"

Peyton started to turn and look at the departing pair, but decided not to show his face. He went with Willie and Gramp to a shower room. While Willie was scrubbing himself, Peyton drew Gramp aside.

"You act as if you don't trust Willie."

Gramp wagged his head. "It ain't that. He'd be too well known to have in with us. I asked you in while you're still unknown. We hope to do something quick."

"You bet it'll have to be quick," Peyton stated. "If that sailor has been singing any sea songs to the Airmen, you and I are probably in a jam."

Gramp's eyes grew hard and serious. "I don't worry about myself. I'm old, a bum, kind of easy for people to forget. But they can do things to you, Blackie, kill you just like that." He snapped his fingers.

"They tried to kill Willie once," reminded Peyton. "He sounds healthy, though."

Willie was singing in the shower. He had a rich bass voice and his song was an old, mournful ballad about a Birmingham jail. He came out, gleaming like a living statue of polished basalt.

"What are you two so glum about?" he asked. "You look like somebody you knew up and died on you."

"Willie," said Gramp, "I hope you ain't turned sooth sayer all of a sudden."

CHAPTER VIII

Circus Day Again

THE hubbub from the thronged stadium penetrated even to the dressing rooms, where Peyton and Willie, in richly worked half-armor, were headed after a particularly dazzling parade. Both of them were in high spirits.

"Who you fighting, Mister Blackie?"

"I don't know. Surprise opponent. And how many times do I have to tell you not to call me—"

"I'm fighting a surprise opponent,

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too," interrupted Willie. "But I think I can guess what they are."

"They?"

"You remember those new animal shipments? We saw them this morning."

"I saw some pigs," Peyton said slowly.

"Gray and black pigs, not awful big, and lean and mean-eyed, with wet-looking, pink noses? Come from South America, those pigs do. They call them peccary."

"Peccary? Never heard about them. What's their specialty?"

"Nothing, except they're mighty nasty in a fight." Willie was grinning with relish. "I hear they drag down men, horses, even bears or panthers."

"You don't sound worried, Willie."

"Why should I be? They'll rush me in a bunch. I'll be all set and jump clear over them. Before they can turn, I'll finish two or three. They'll rush again, I'll jump over and do it again. And so on."

They came to the door of their dressing room.

An Airman was standing there.

"Dress down the corridor," he told Willie.

"But my stuff's in with Mister Blackie's," Willie protested.

"It's been moved. General Argyle wants to speak to Peyton alone."

Willie grabbed Peyton's hand and wished him luck, then walked on. Peyton opened the door and entered.

Argyle and Thora sat in chairs. Thora smiled, Argyle nodded. Peyton tried not to sound or look disturbed as he said:

"Glad to see you two. What's on your minds?"

Argyle took the cigarette holder out of his mouth.

"Do you know a man named Bengali, a so-called poet?"

The truth would be best for the present.

"Of course I know him, General. Why?"

"I'm asking the questions. I hear that you and he are cooking up some sort of monkey business. Tell me everything, quick!"

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Peyton smiled invertedly, turned to the dressing table. Sparring for time, he picked up several pieces of armor.

"Where's Gramp Hooker? He ought to be here to help me get ready."

"You're refusing to answer," accused Argyle.

"Think fast, Blackie, you're on a spot," warned a small, wise voice inside of him. He stooped, buckled on a thigh piece, a greave, an iron shoe, made the joinings fast. He had an inspiration by then. "You're suspicious of me for some reason, General. I can't be sure what. I could deny things now, but you wouldn't believe me. Hadn't we better wait, cool down, see what charges are being made? Let's talk it out after the show."

"There may be no after-the-show for you," said Argyle.

Peyton put on more leg armor.

"Gladiators take that chance. I have my mind on the show and what may happen to me."

"Let me talk to him, General," Thora said.

Argyle nodded stiffly and walked out.

PEYTON faced Thora, trying to read her face.

"Pierce," she said, "you can trust me. Please tell me everything. You're in a jam, but I'll try to help you out."

He wished he could trust her, knew he had to say something.

"It wouldn't help me if I confirmed Argyle's suspicions," he temporized.

Thora came close and put a hand on his armored shoulder.

"The Airmen have evidence that you're mixed up in something called the Committee against the Airmen, which plans to make some sort of rebellion. If you're really in it, you'll be dangerous because of your knowledge of atomic power."

He realized that she spoke the truth. Reduce things to their simplest terms and atomic power was what made the Airmen fly, set them above the ground people. Bengali had spoken of experimental motors. Peyton's bits of knowledge would round out such work. Again he temporized:

"You and they believe that I'm mixed up in a thing like that, right after coming out of stir?"

"They're fairly sure, and I know it," she said flatly. "You gave it away when you spoke to me in the park about the Airmen's wives being 'hostages in case of trouble.' I told you then that you spoke dangerously, but I didn't know how deeply you were involved. Argyle and the Airmen take the talk of an uprising very seriously."

"You make me feel important," he answered as casually as he could. "But if they're so sure I'm in it, why don't they go to work on me without any questions?"

"Because," said Thora, "they want information from you. It will help convict the others in the movement."

Peyton's inverted smile came back into view. He took a helmet, plumed and visored, from the dressing table, but did not put it on. He made a last effort to bluff it out.

"I ought to thank the Airmen for the high opinion they have of me. But if—mind you, I say *if*—I were mixed up in the committee, or whatever it is, and if I ratted on my friends, where would I be then? I'd be as guilty as ever and worse off, because I'd have given the information and would be of no use. Go tell that to General Argyle."

Thora went to the door, put her hand out to open it. She paused and turned back.

"Can't you see that I want to save you, Pierce?"

"You're holding up the circus, lady. I've got a show to put on. People are expecting me to give them a treat."

"That's part of it!" she cried. "Right now Argyle has given up any hope of getting any information from you. He'll have passed on some orders that he had all ready. They'll send in opponents that you can't hope to kill—opponents that will destroy you very showily, with all the stadium howling in delight!"

"I heard of something like that being tried on Willie Burgoyne and not working." He breathed deeply. "I think you're wasting time in being nice to me."

"Why?"

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"Shall I tell you the story of my life, Thora? I was born wretched. My folks died when I was a kid. I got mixed up with some crooks and by hard luck was sent up for murder. I was an incorrigible convict. They put me down in the Pit. You know what that is, I see."

SHE stared. "Why do you say that?"

"Because you jumped when you heard the name. In the Pit, you smash atoms for this power the Airmen use. It's hard work, dirty, killing. Mostly you crack up or go crazy, or get a bad heart and die. I didn't do any of those. I shook off twenty long, hard years. And then, because I saved some guard's life, they let me go. I'm only an ex-convict, Thora. Get that into your head."

"Pierce," she said, "there's a light switch above your dressing table. Go to it."

"What for?" he asked, but set down his helmet and put his hand on the switch.

"Keep your eyes on me," she directed. "Now turn out the light."

The windowless room was plunged into blackness, but in that blackness appeared two faces. The luminous features of Peyton stared at the luminous features of Thora. In the darkness the glowing masks moved toward each other.

"What is this?" asked Peyton huskily.

"Isn't it pretty evident?"

"Only one thing can make your skin shed light—Pit glow."

"Which I've got, Pierce, just like you. I served three years in the Women's Division down there. You never heard of the Women's Division, I was sentenced for killing an Airman."

"How?"

"He was head of the circus here before Argyle and saw me at a performance. He was drunk or drugged, and got too friendly. I gave him a push. He fell into the arena and a tiger got him. Of course it was called murder."

"How did you manage to beat the rap?"

"General Argyle made a visit to the Pit. I was pointed out to him as the reason for his promotion. I was in rough clothes, ungroomed and haggard, but he thought he saw something worth developing. He needed an attractive woman for the publicity job I've been doing. He also needed a spy, someone who could attract men and hear their idle talk, keep him and other Airmen informed of what goes on here in town."

"I see why you want to be a faithful employee."

"But, Pierce, my heart goes out to someone who served in that Pit!"

Peyton turned on the lights, picked up his helmet again.

"Go to Argyle," he said. "Tell him that I kept quiet. I'm going to fight whatever he sends against me and try to do what Willie did. If I conquer whatever it is—"

"Of course!" breathed Thora. "The people will cheer you too enthusiastically for him to let you be destroyed at once. After that, though, there'll be more questions."

"I'll talk to Argyle afterward," promised Peyton. "If I know he can't kill me, I'll make some sort of trade on the information and slide out. Pull for me, will you?"

They were still close together. Thora suddenly stood on tiptoe and kissed his savage mouth. She turned and ran out.

Alone, Peyton slid the helmet over his head and hooked it securely to his shoulder armor. The barred visor he drew down over his face. For a moment he regarded himself in the mirror. He looked like the personification of fighting manhood. Well, he'd tried to be smart, out-think the Airmen and the men who rallied behind Bengali. He'd put himself in a nasty mess. Now it was up to him to fight his way out. He thought he could do it.

"Fight!" he cried savagely at his own image.

His voice roared unrecognizably inside the closed helmet. Belting on his sword, he selected a shield from among several that hung on the wall. He went out and up the corridor toward the curtained entrance to the

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arena. An attendant waited there.

"Hurry, Peyton! You're due out on the sand. They're yelling their heads off for you."

"Then they can stick their heads back on," retorted Peyton. "Here I come."

Brushing the curtain aside, he tramped into the open. Thora's kiss still thrilled his lips as they tightened in the inverted fighting grin.

CHAPTER IX

The Shouting and the Tumult

PEYTON mitted himself to the bellowing masses and faced the door through which his unknown enemy would come. A sort of muffling fog seemed to settle down all around, just inside the line of the box-fronts. The great funnel of faces in the stadium became dimmed and unimportant. The multiple howl and cheer died away to an oceanic murmur. Peyton drew his sword. Inside his visor he grinned to himself. He didn't feel the slightest possibility of defeat.

The door opposite him was opening. An armed and armored figure came out, much bigger than he and moving with slow, sure steps.

The armor of his adversary might have been stolen from a museum. A cuirass of rigid, gold-embossed plating caged the thick torso. The closed helmet, with comb atop, was connected to the shoulders of the cuirass by a jointed collar and a chain mail tag in front, like a jabot. The arms, forearms and wrists were similarly protected by cunning jointed pieces. Even the chain mail mittens had backs of plating.

You didn't see work like that in these days, mused Peyton appreciatively. The old-timers must have taken pride in every hammer-tap. The brawny legs wore skintight breeches of leather, faced on the front of thigh and shin with curved slips of steel. All told, it was as good armor as Peyton's own, and maybe a trifle better.

The big fellow was approaching lightly and surely, for all the metal he wore. But as he came near, he paused. He was somehow indecisive. Peyton felt his neck-hair bristle inside the brass-mounted gorget.

"I don't know who you are," he addressed the other in his heart, "but I'm going to make you sick of the gladiator business."

He, too, moved in, tensing his muscles for action. If the crowd cheered any louder, he did not know.

Clang!

Peyton struck, heard the ring and felt the shock of his blade on the quickly interposed shield of the big gladiator. He set himself for the *riposte*. It did not come. His enemy was falling back warily. At last Peyton could hear the mob in the stadium. It was booing.

"Come on and fight," Peyton taunted. His voice sounded big and hoarse inside the helmet. "I don't usually speak to strangers, but we've got a show to give."

He prodded tentatively with his point, seeking a way around the edge of the opposing shield. Forced to make a return, the other stabbed, but without much strength. Peyton easily turned the attack with a flick of his shield wrist. He replied with a whacking cut that almost beat down the other's guard and nicked the comb of the helmet.

"Are you here to fight or play pattycake?" jeered Peyton. "I can't do the work for both of us."

He feinted the other's shield aside, cut under neatly and pricked the left arm at a point where the shoulder piece had momentarily slid away. A widening red stain appeared on the bright armor.

"First blood!" cried a woman.

He saw that his enemy's retreat had brought them close to the wall, at a point near Argyle's box. That had been Thora cheering him. Peyton felt his blood race. He was winning. He was being cheered to victory by the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. If only this rickety guy would make a scrap of it, give him a chance to show 'em a flash, he'd be a hero! A thousand General Argyles would not dare to kick him around.

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This was easy, Peyton thought, grinning. Your feet grew lighter instead of heavier in those iron shoes. The creak and jingle of your armor made a sort of music. Your hands did what you wanted, even before your mind was made up. And you moved and fought twice as flashily, daring to take showy chances because your big, lumbering opponent was dull or scared or sick, or all three.

Why did Willie Burgoyne object to fighting and killing other men when they were strangers? Armor them and pull down their visors and they quit being human, just a sort of cross between a punching dummy and a hard-shelled crab.

Shield grated against shield. You felt the other's strength. He did have that, though he didn't seem to use it. Better not hustle and heave against so much bulk, Blackie. Stay away. Fence and fool him. Make him look ridiculous. Ho! Another touch at the seam, where the front and back halves of the cuirass came together. More blood. And the big husk charged at last, because he had to.

Willie Burgoyne beat the rhinoceros. That was the way. Peyton waited until the great, ironclad body was almost upon him, then sprang wide. For a moment the foe couldn't wheel. Peyton made a sweeping cut with his sword, hard and wicked. The edge bit into the side of the helmet. Down clanged the big carcass, like an old wood stove collapsing. It quivered, rolled over on its back, sword flying one way, shield another. It didn't get up.

What to do now? Oh, yes, Willie had told him that. The fallen giant was still breathing deep, painful whistles and stirring a little, but he must be badly hurt. Peyton shoved him back on the sand with an iron shoe. Sword-point resting on the arena floor, hands crossed on the hilt. Pose. Look toward General Argyle's box, see what the crowd wants.

No doubt what the crowd wanted. Fists were up and reversed, thumbs pointing down. Death for the man who was down. Argyle was making the motion imperatively. Thora wasn't turning her thumb down. Her hands were clasped. She was smiling at Peyton.

Nobody who is human likes to kill in cold blood, but if it must, it must. Sword-point to that chain mail over the throat. Press hard. It goes in deep. Blood spurts like a fountain.

More cheers. Peyton frowned. Who was this fellow he'd killed? On impulse, he lifted a toe and roughly kicked upon the visor.

"Willie!"

WILLIE'S flat, dark face was growing strangely bloodless, bruise-tinted. Peyton felt the mist close in, blinding and deafening. He dropped to his knees, felt the sand working up under the plates of his shin armor.

"So it was you, Mister Blackie . . . I didn't want to fight. . . ."

Different face now. Not gentle or hurt or anything at all. Just blank. That's how your friend looks after you've killed him. Close those fixed eyes. Blood on your glove. Your friend's blood. You've killed Willie Burgoyne.

Up on your feet again, quick! Attendants coming, in clown suits, with big hooks to drag Willie away. Whirl your sword.

"Stand back, you rats! Nobody touches that body! Nobody, you hear?"

The clowns run. They look funny. Everybody in the stands is laughing, but the clowns don't feel funny, you can bet. Now what's the whooping about? Turn around, Blackie Peyton. They've sent something else in after you.

Unghh!

What makes a sound like that? What a brute! You've only seen pictures of such things, heard stories. It's a gorilla, big, meaty-muscled, like Willie. Dark-faced, like Willie. Maybe you could have made a friend out of the gorilla, given a chance. No chance now. He's coming at you, up on his short, bent legs, beating his chest. That chest must be as hard as wood.

Gorillas aren't really born bad. But this one was caged for months while men teased it. All it wants is a

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chance to get within grab-reach of a man. And you're a man, Blackie. It's going to get within grab-reach of you. Get that shield up, that sword up. You're fighting for your life!

Over as quick and easy as that? Did it kill you before you knew it? No, you're still standing. It's the gorilla that's down, about a dozen yards from Willie, with your sword through it. Pull the sword out.

That was a fluke. It smacked at you. You ducked. It grabbed. Hugging you, it hugged your sword-point right through its own solar plexus. Your armor saved your ribs. Another flat, dark, dead face. Bend down. Close the poor beast's eyes as you closed Willie's. No, no time for that! Here comes the next course.

A scampering, mousy-gray herd of pigs. Pigs? These are the peccary that Willie expected to fight. Bad medicine, those. If they get those thorny tusks into you, they'll pull you down. Your armor won't save you. Do what Willie planned to do. Stand ready, knees bent. Here they are, right onto you, twelve or thirteen—

Jump, Blackie!

You're behind them. You got three in three slashes. Kill another as they form and rush. Jump again, free, kill two. Only half a dozen left. Wisely they stand off. Don't wait for them to start trouble, rush them yourself. Six can be killed before they can rip through your leg armor. It's pig-sticking. They're easy to kill, if you don't care whether you're killed yourself or not. . . .

They're all down. Peccary, imported at great trouble and expense from the tropics. You've stuck them all in about ninety seconds. Listen to the crowd yell its ugly head off, because here we go again!

They've turned an elephant loose on you. No trappings, no tusks, and the only cruel eyes you ever saw in an elephant. You've heard of this one. They trained him to knock a man down and kneel on him. Well, why run or hide? Get it over with.

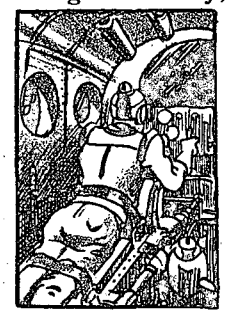
But the monster has stopped by Willie's body. *Sniff, sniff,* goes the trunk.

"Hey, you get up off him!"

It's kneeling on Willie. Run at the big, doubled-down hunk of meat. It's lifting its trunk. Slash—slash hard! Hundreds of muscles in an elephant's trunk, but no bone. You've cut that trunk off with one blow. The elephant's on his feet again, spouting blood. He's dying, down on his knees, collapsing. You've killed an elephant with a sword.

And now the crowd deafens you. Look, they've got their hands open, palm out! The mercy sign—General Argyle couldn't have you killed, after all. The people won't let you die. They want to save you for other shows. They love to watch other men kill other men. . . .

Argyle recognizes the voice of the people, even if the people aren't all Airmen. He signals mercy, too. Sud-



denly silence. You can hear it. There's a trapdoor opening in the sand. A microphone pole sprouts out.

You're to talk, eh? Well, talk! Step up, Blackie, rip open your visor. You've got something to say.

"You should have killed me when you had the chance. You made my friend die, but his death is your finish. I'm still alive, still your enemy. The enemy of this circus. Of the Airmen who run it. Of all who bow to the Airmen. Now I'm going to walk out of here. Stop me, anyone who dares. I'm as full of death as a drug store and some of it will rub off on the first one who touches me!"

Still the silence, like swamp water over your head. Walk toward the exit, Blackie. Your feet aren't light in the iron shoes now. They're like lead. Don't be surprised if they drop off at the ankles.

Somebody may shoot you in the back as you walk out. What do you care?

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CHAPTER X

Argyle Asks Questions

AS Peyton slouched into the dressing room, Gramp rose and came toward him. Peyton lifted a fending glove.

"Don't touch me, Gramp. Right guys shouldn't dirty their hands on rats."

"I seen it, Blackie. You didn't know it was Willie till—"

"No, I didn't." Peyton unshipped his helmet and threw it clanging into a corner. He took a pitcher of water from the table, sloshed it over his head and down inside his body armor. "He didn't know it was me, either. But I sailed in to kill a stranger, and he stood off. That was the difference."

"You're no rat," Gramp said, helping to unlace the cuirass.

"I went with you to see the chief of the committee, Bengali. I declared myself in. Meanwhile, I figured to make a flash in the circus. I was going to ride both trains and figure which was the graviest for me."

Gramp was silent. Finally he said: "You've made up your mind our way. I know, or you wouldn't admit that much now."

Peyton kicked off the iron shoes. Clad only in shorts, he reached for a towel.

"Listen, Gramp, I feel trouble coming. Bengali is in it, too. I'll try to kick him free. But you're in the clear. Stay that way."

"I ain't scared!" argued Gramp, his beard bristling.

Peyton rubbed himself down.

"No, but you'll do more good if you aren't scooped up." He got into shoes, trousers and shirt. "I'm a rat, I said, but I've got right guy blood in me somewhere. And these Airmen aren't even rats. They're cockroaches."

The door opened.

"Oh, are we cockroaches?" General Argyle sneered.

He came in. Four Airmen, all big and fierce-looking, followed him. Bengali walked last, drawn of face.

"Get out of here," Argyle ordered Gramp.

"Guess I'd better, Blackie," said Gramp.

He left. Argyle closed the door after him.

"Are we cockroaches?" asked Argyle again.

Peyton skinned his teeth in the inverted smile.

"You are. All the wings in the world won't make butterflies out of you."

An Airman clenched a fist like a twelve-pound shot, but Argyle halted him with a gesture.

"Peyton, I asked you before the show if you knew Bengali."

"I told you I did. He sat in your box with me last week."

"And you haven't been seeing him since?"

"What would I be seeing him for?" Peyton's eyes insulted Bengali. "I club with men, not orchids."

"Bring in that other captive," Argyle ordered.

One of the Airmen opened the door and beckoned. The hook-nosed man who had met Peyton in the Underways bar came in. Argyle addressed the old sailor, pointing to Peyton:

"This is the man who drank with you and spoke against the Airmen?"

"Yes."

Argyle pointed to Bengali.

"What about this one?"

The sailor studied Bengali and shook his head.

"Isn't he the man who stays in the back office of that bar sometimes?"

"I've never been in the back office."

"You can go," said Argyle. "You, too, Bengali. But both of you stay within reach of me."

AFTER they had left, Argyle locked the door.

"Peyton, you're mixed up in some silly plot. I tried to give you an easy out today, in the show, but—"

"Yes," broke in Peyton harshly, "only I killed the things that were supposed to kill me. The crowd gave me life. I can't be killed, right?"

"Right," agreed the general. "But you can be half-killed." He sat on the edge of the dressing table. The four

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Airmen drew together in a group, glaring at Peyton. "Talk, or else."

"I'm through talking," said Peyton. "Cockroaches are bores to talk to. So come on and try to 'or else' me."

Argyle looked at his companions and shrugged his shoulders. Two of them stepped forward on either side of Peyton, swung their fists at the same moment. He went into a ducking crouch, swift as a bobbin on a loom. Both swings missed. Peyton hit one of the attackers in the belly, kicked the shin of the other and jumped away.

As the nearest man turned toward him, Peyton lashed out with his left. The turning head spun hard against his knuckles and the Airman sat down with a grunt. At once Peyton leaped upon the other. His two fists made blurs in the air. He planted eight blows in the body and two in the face. The second attacker sprawled across the first man, who was groggily trying to rise.

Peyton set his back to a corner and laughed. He was actually glad that the fight had started.

"I once dared any two Airmen to fight me," he panted.

"There are more than two here," said Argyle.

The fallen men got to their feet. All four of the subordinate Airmen rushed at Peyton. He hit the foremost one on the chin, weaved past him, hit another man twice in the face, then floored the one he had just struck with a fourth blow. The two hit the floor at once, but their comrades were at Peyton's back, hitting him repeatedly. His head rang with the blows.

He crouched low under his protecting arms, like a man trying to fend off bricks falling from a ruined wall. He turned and both belabored his face. Under the weight of many blows he fell. His nose and cheeks were covered with blood, through which flashed the white of his inverted smile.

"This is fun," he snarled, rolled over and got to his knees.

All four of them were upon him at once, kicking and buffeting. General Argyle had not moved from his perch on the edge of the table. He drew his long holder from a breast pocket, carefully fitted in a cigarette and lighted it.

"He's had enough," he said. The four Airmen straightened up. Peyton lay on the floor, face down. Dizzy but game, he turned over and got slowly and painfully to his feet. His face and knuckles were bleeding.

"Who said I had enough?" he demanded thickly. "I'm not even warmed up yet."

"Peyton," said Argyle, "you're going to tell us who is running the trouble-makers down in the Underways."

"All I'm going to tell you is that you're not even cockroaches! Cockroaches are aristocrats, compared with Airmen who have to gang a real scrapper five against one!"

"I was wrong," Argyle sighed to his men. "He hasn't had enough."

VIOLENTLY they threw themselves upon Peyton. All of them were bigger than he. As they bunched close, they shut out all view of the walls, the floor, General Argyle. Their blows struck like alternate sledge-hammers. He heard them grunt and snort with the effort. Shrivelling under that bombardment, he still kept his feet and made some sort of return. One man howled in pain as Peyton got home on his face.

Three or four minutes, longer than eons, went by. From far off, General Argyle yelled, "Stand easy!" and they fell back from him on all sides.

He was going down. He knew he had kept on his feet only because the flying fists on all sides had held him there. Now he collapsed heavily. He felt as if he would come apart at the joints. Blood was all over him.

One of the Airmen turned him face-up with a boot toe. Argyle stood over him, looking gigantic.

"Are you going to talk?" he demanded.

He sounded as if he were far away on a faulty telephone. Peyton managed to shake his head from side to side.

"You were right about my not killing you, Peyton. The public won't stand for it. But you won't get away

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from me. Tell me what I want to know and I'll send you to the prison hospital. After that you'll have only light confinement."

"And—if—I—don't?"

Argyle jerked his thumb downward, as he had done at the circus to signal the death of Willie Burgoyne.

"Back to the Pit!"

Atomic power was manufactured there. With atomic power, if one could get some and escape, Bengali's committee might contend on equal terms with the Airmen—

"Below the Pit," Argyle said, "there's a deeper and tougher hole yet, where the prisoners go who are too tough for even the atom-smashery. Food's thrown down once a day. No lights. No beds. They mine ore to make inerton for the atomic containers. If they don't send up their quota, there's more misery. Now start talking, or down you go."

Peyton tried to form words of defiance. His pulped lips could not respond. All he could do was stick out his tongue and make an unpleasant, scornful sound.

Argyle turned and opened his mouth to give an order. At that moment a remnant of strength woke in Peyton's mauled body. He dragged himself erect again, hit Argyle under the ear. Argyle reeled rubber-legged across the room and floundered against the wall.

At the same moment the last energy flowed out through those knuckles and Peyton fell, more limply than before. He could not see or feel, but he heard an Airman speak.

"He's out, cold as the end of a dog's nose."

"Pick him up then," Argyle commanded. "The Pit's going to get him, and the Hole under the Pit."

If they touched him, Peyton did not know. He did not know anything except a dream of the Flying Island and himself blowing it into rainbow bubbles with a handful of atomic power.

* * * * *

The Hole below the Pit was blacker than space without stars. Nothing shone or made noise in the hollowed vestibule, until a trap-door creaked high above and yellow lamplight stole down in a patch.

"Hello!" called a guard.

The door to the mine corridors opened. A phosphorescent face came into view, turning upward.

"What is it?" the face asked.

"You were three-quarters of a ton short on delivery yesterday."

"We're sorry—"

"No excuses. If you don't make eight tons today, you don't eat tonight. You get tear gas instead. Fix it up among yourselves."

THE trap-door slammed. The yellow light vanished. The convict spokesman went back into the gallery. Faces, hands and bare arms gave Pit glow enough to reveal a soot-colored tunnel of rock, outcropped with veins and mottlings that looked like black lead. Six convicts leaned on crowbars and shovels while the spokesman told what the guard had said.

"The six of us could dig eight tons," the biggest convict growled. "Five of us can't. That new guy is welshing, the one they sent down in a basket." He pointed with his crowbar at the bruised phosphorescence that was Blackie Peyton's face. "Listen, new guy, if you don't start heaving your weight down here, we'll stomp you."

"I've been stomped by experts," retorted Peyton. "I don't think you boys can do the job any better. And I've dug as much as anybody here."

"That's a lie!"

"It's the truth. I've found native inerton, the stuff they use to make containers and motor linings for atomic power. I've peeled off enough sheets, in the five or six days I've been here, to clear us all out of this Hole."

"If we waste more time and get under our quota, we'll do without food and get a big whiff of tear gas to sleep on."

"Tear gas?" repeated Peyton. "That guard has tear gas bombs up there?"

"We've had it before."

"Swell!" Peyton cried. He went to a little nook in the tunnel. From it he dragged something that looked like a big, rough megaphone, six feet long

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and tapering from a finger-wide mouthpiece to a two-foot bell. It was dull black and he had trouble lifting it. "This is what I've done with the inerton I found."

"If we broke that thing up and mixed it with rock and dirt," a convict said hurriedly, "it could make enough ore to—"

"Nobody breaks it up," stated Peyton. "This is a flying machine. It's crude, but it's inerton and it can fly, if it has atomic."

He took from a pocket of his soiled trousers a dark cylinder, also of inerton, about as large as a pistol cartridge. At sight of it, the other convicts shrank away.

"Don't handle that carelessly," warned one.

"I know what I'm doing," Peyton said. "I came down here to do it. Go ahead, stick out your eyes. I let them put me down here, so I could get my hands on inerton and atomic and take them away. I had to be brought down on a stretcher, but I got enough strength to reach out and steal this from a dump we passed."

HE slid the cylinder of atomic into the small upper end of his cone.

"She can fly now. Who wants to come up with me? I've got a crushout all planned."

"Nothing doing," growled the big convict. "We wouldn't have a chance. They'd kill us all."

"You want to stay down here forever?"

"No, but—"

"Rest of you feel that way?" There was no reply, only a general fidgeting. Peyton's gleaming lip curled. "Then I'll go alone. Why should I drag any excess baggage?"

The other convicts went into a huddle. One argued that Peyton's escape would be charged against them, with resultant penalization. Peyton broke this discussion in the middle.

"You seem to think that life's sweet, even here. I don't. See this?" He pried the bit of atomic from its lodgment in the cone's end. "It has just container enough to hold it in when it's carefully handled. Monkey with me and I'll drop it and we'll all be through with all of our troubles."

Nobody spoke. With cone and cylinder, Peyton backed toward the door that led to the recess beneath the trap. He opened it, went through and closed the door behind him.

The light of his face was barely enough to see by, but he managed. Setting the cone on the floor, its tip pointing toward the place where the trap-door would be, he drew his thumbnail sharply across one end of the little cylinder of atomic. With orderly haste he set it in the tip of the cone, scratched-end down, and fastened it there with a piece of the metal. Then he threw his arms around the upper part of the cone.

Something hissed, like escaping air. The cone stirred, rose. He clung with all his strength and even then was almost dislodged. The speed of the rising cone was something less than a bullet, something more than an elevator. Peyton saw the trap-door above, ducked his head and let the cone-tip strike and hurl the trap open.

He rose like a pheasant into a yellow-lighted chamber, narrow and dingily lighted. As the cone drew him clear of the trap, Peyton let go and fell clumsily, but on his feet. He faced a guard, whose utter amazement made him helpless. Peyton hit the guard in the face, in the belly and in the face again. Guard and cone both clattered down on the floor.

CHAPTER XI

Crushout

PEYTON flung himself down beside the stunned man, clawing at round objects dangling from the belt. They were thin metal containers of tear gas. He rose, went to a box-shaped radio that gave two-way communication with upper levels. A couple of kicks wrecked it. He walked quickly to a metal door marked "Decompression Chamber."

Inside, he set the slack-off mechanism and, as once before, took a shower. It felt good. After a long enough

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wait, he went out the other side, completely nude and carrying only the gas bombs. Before he closed the exit door behind him, he tossed in a bomb. It burst in the decompression chamber. He smiled. Nobody would chase after him until the tear gas was winnowed out.

He walked to the elevator to the next level and paused to smash another radio box beside it. A uniformed guard in the elevator cage ripped out an oath of amazement. Peyton faced him, a gas bomb poised.

"Don't move!" he cautioned in a deadly voice. "Come out here and shuck that uniform."

The guard obeyed. Taking the uniform, Peyton entered the elevator and sent it upward. While it ascended, he got into the clothes. They were not too bad a fit. All he needed was a truculent swagger to complete his disguise as a petty prison employee.

At each level he passed through a decompression chamber, rode up in the elevator beyond. Each chamber he turned into a pursuit obstacle by dropping one of his gas bombs. Each radio set he destroyed. One or two guards whom he passed looked up, nodded, but did not challenge.

He permitted himself to feel a little easier. The only jailers who knew a convict was escaping were below. The smashed radios made them voiceless. The tear gas in the decompression chambers made it impossible for them to follow.

At the eleventh level he paused. There, he knew, a freight elevator was constantly being loaded with atomic. He sought it, unobtrusively joined the group of lesser guards and prison trusties who were transferring metal cases full of inerton cylinders from a great stack to a car. So careful were they, and so engrossed in handling their fearful load, that he had no trouble in filling his pockets with small cylinders ranging in size from pistol-cartridge to pint-bottle. Eventually he strolled away to an elevator marked "To Outer Grounds."

It carried him straight up to the surface. The change in pressure was somewhat unpleasant, but not distressing. Outside it was night, a little chilly, with a sky full of stars. Near him he heard the voice of the subway kiosk:

"New York subway here."

In that direction he turned his steps.

GRAMP HOOKER came to the door of the shabby saloon among the pilings of the Underways, carrying a mug of beer. He peered through the dim light at a man in uniform who stood there.

"You came here asking after me?" queried Gramp. "Is this an arrest? You ain't got anything on me—"

The uniformed man snatched off his low-drawn cap. Gramp dropped the mug.

"Blackie! Get that cap back on. Every Airman and Airman's jackal is after you. They know you escaped early tonight and this place is full of snitches. I'm unimportant, a screwy old man. They don't bother me, but —"

"Get me into that office with Bengali," said Peyton.

"He isn't here. Follow me."

Gramp led the way along the street to a sideway, little more than a trail among the masses of pillars that crossed it. Boldly he squeezed in among the pillars themselves. Peyton, close behind, saw that some of the upright posts bore rough marks, like trail-blazes on the trees of a forest.

Deep in this maze, Gramp lifted his voice in a quavering hoot, like that of an owl. It was answered. Gramp plunged forward to a gravelike depression among the pilings, in which sat Bengali, no longer elegant and immaculate, over a small fire in a tin can. Bengali jumped up and seized Peyton's hand.

"You did what we hoped—hit for the bar and found Gramp!" he exclaimed. "How did you get away from that prison?"

"Too long a story," replied Peyton. "You still have a chance to lick the Airmen?"

"It's now or never. Argyle is going to jump up to the Flying Island at noon for a showdown with Torridge."

Peyton whistled. "Just like that, huh?"

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"He knows there's an uprising trying to get started and wants to be in the saddle before it happens. Otherwise, as New York's chief general, he'll have to stick here and put it down. Once he's running things, he'll be set for anything. And if he fails, if Torridge wins, then Torridge will be so careful and tough that we'd be doomed at our first move. It's now or never, and I think it'll be never."

"CUT that out!" piped Gramp. "Here's Blackie and he's up to something. Right, Blackie?"

"Right. Bengali, you said once that you had experimental motors that could be flown with atomic."

"I have, one dozen of them. We have no planes—the Airmen hold those—but on a high level is a museum with some old models that're in good condition. We could fit the motors into them."

"How about pilots? The only ones who know how to fly are Airmen—"

"The devil you preach!" snorted Gramp. "When I was a kid, my dad carried me down to Kitty Hawk to watch the Wright boys mizzle that box-kite of theirs around. First World War, I shot six Heinies out from in back of Richthofen himself. In Nineteen-twenty-seven, if I hadn't gone on a drunk, I might have been the first man across the Atlantic, instead of Lindbergh. I flew and fought in China, Ethiopia, Spain, Greece, Libya. And if I'd had sense enough to dye my hair and lie about my age twenty years ago, I'd have been in the Third World War and a big Airman today."

He shook his knobbed finger under Peyton's nose.

"Listen, I've fought and flown jaloppies that these Airmen willie-boys couldn't even roll out of the hangar, let alone take off the ground."

"That answers me, I guess," Peyton laughed.

"But what I lack is atomic power," mourned Bengali. "I haven't any to give Gramp for a flight."

"As Gramp says, the devil you preach! Look what else escaped from stir."

Gingerly Peyton began to empty his pockets.

The aeronautical section of the museum was lofty and spacious, full of archaic aircraft. To one side was a wall made up of window glass, now black with the night outside. From the ceiling hung a frail fabric of hickory lath and silk, such as Gramp Hooker called a "box-kite." Below it stood a dull lead-colored plane, with steel-faced wings and fuselage. Against another wall were ranged several small fighters of bygone wars. Nothing in that exhibit dated any later than 1948.

Across the threshold sprawled the gray-uniformed night watchman, twitching and moaning softly, where a sweeping blow of Peyton's padded length of lead pipe had spilled him. Gramp, entering beside Peyton, looked with beady eyes at the fallen man, then knelt to tie him.

"Gosh, what technique!" Gramp exclaimed.

Bengali and the others, carrying the inerton motors, moved past with admiring side-glances.

"Peyton's a past master at his art," Bengali agreed.

"Get your blow in first, eh?"

"First, second, third, fourth, and all the way." Peyton looked around. "This lad and the one we rushed at the door ought to be the only opposition in this wing. Now we've got the place to ourselves and it's not midnight yet."

The motors, each about as big as a two-gallon pail, were stacked together. Bengali had also brought a canvas bag, which he now opened, revealing black powder.

"I made it myself," he explained. "Some of you go to the gun rooms. Bring all the old muzzle-loaders that have flintlocks in good condition. We have no percussion caps. Peyton, I thought I'd have good news for you, but it's bad."

"Bad?" echoed Peyton. "What about?"

Bengali beckoned him away from the others.

"About your friend, Thora. I hoped to bring her here. I knew that she and you—"

"How did you know?"

"She told me that and much more.

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After you were carried off to prison, she came and gave me information. On what she's told, I've based most of my findings about Argyle's planned coup. Argyle, with every armed plane, will go up in the stratosphere at noon tomorrow and board the Island. The Airmen on duty here are behind him."

"You started to talk about Thora," Peyton reminded him harshly.

"She became one of us. I went to get her before meeting you to rush the museum guards. She's gone."

"Gone?" Peyton clutched Bengali by the front of his coat. "Gone where?"

"I don't know. I don't think Argyle knows, either. I understand he's got an order out for her to be brought in, dead or alive. I'm sorry, Peyton."

Peyton's eyes slitted. "She's in with us, you say. She's where neither you nor Argyle can find her. That means she's up to a game of her own, something in connection with this uprising, and something she's doing single-handed. She's all right, Bengali. I'm sure of it. And I'm not going to waste valuable time swooning with worry. She needs us to work with her."

GRAMP joined them.

"Say," he reported, "we're out of luck."

"How?" asked Bengali.

"These planes have been kept in good shape, but I don't trust the fabric jobs with an atomic motor. There's just two metal scows, small cockpit jobs, that might do. Ain't a very big fleet."

"It's enough to land two or three of us on the Island," said Peyton, "and that ought to be enough."

His companions gaped in amazement.

"Not enough to carry the place by storm, maybe," he explained swiftly, "but enough to win it by brains. You said I was a great one for getting my lick in first, but that's not the only way to win a fight. Did you ever hear about making the other guy throw a punch, then ducking and countering while he misses? That's the way to handle these Airmen. If—"

"Sounds too complicated," objected Gramp.

"Yes, so don't waste time explaining," seconded Bengali. "Peyton, you see a chance to do this job. I don't. I'm going to hand over command to you, here and now. Work fast, man!"

"What are you standing around for, Gramp?" cried Peyton. "Put motors in those two planes. Pick out the best pilot from among these old vets you've gathered. Load up with atomic and stand by to take off." Gramp saluted with a twinkle and grin, and hurried to obey. "Bengali, how many men have you got that you can count on?"

"Eight hundred, maybe a thousand, down in the Underways where I can put a hand on them."

"If they're tough enough, with a few weapons it ought to be plenty. How often have you watched the Flying Island go over?"

Bengali stared strangely.

"Not often. You get used to it."

"You do. I don't. Bengali, I've watched it go over every day during the two weeks I've been out. That Island made a big dent in my mind. I've not only watched it go over New York, but I've watched it go away. I've followed the shadow on the trees, the landscape. Where's a map of this part of the country?"

Bengali still stared, but pointed toward another part of the museum.

"That room ought to be full of old ones."

They went together. Peyton tore open a showcase and took out a yard-wide map of what used to be New York's metropolitan area. He did mental arithmetic half-aloud.

"Seven hundred miles an hour—seventy miles in six minutes—thirty-five in three. That ought to be time and distance enough." He laid his finger on a point on the map. "You know what this place is?"

Bengali studied it.

"The map says Lake Hopatcong, but—"

"I know. Nobody goes there any more. Well, it's twelve hours until the Flying Island arrives. You're going to march your men there in those twelve hours. Take this map and get

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started." He thrust the paper into Bengali's hand. "Be ready for trouble, too."

"Won't you give me a little bit of an idea?" Bengali pleaded.

"This much. You'll do it if I promise that Argyle and Torridge and their followers will be there, shaken up and off-balance for you to fight. You're spoiling for a chance like that. Get going while you have time. This map and a compass will help. I'll be seeing you!"

He gave Bengali a push between the shoulders to start him, then went to where Gramp supervised the changing of the motors. Another grizzled man, whose name was Wertz, had been chosen to pilot the second plane. Someone had brought oxygen tanks and masks.

"Just what we need," approved Peyton, inspecting the masks. "Now, is there a parachute in the house?"

There was one.

"Put it on, Wertz. I'm loading all the extra atomic containers into your second cockpit."

Wertz shrugged. "Suit yourself. You're boss. But if my plane cracks up—"

"I want it to crack up," Peyton told him. "You'll aim it at a target I show you, then bail out. Yours is the easiest job of all." He raised his voice. "Wertz, Gramp Hooker stand by your planes! The rest of you, go with Bengali. He'll lead you to the best fighting you've ever had!"

They departed and he faced the two pilots.

"Attention to orders. I won't take a minute. Then we'll stand easy until dawn. As the Sun comes up, we'll fly right out through those big windows yonder."

"We're listening," said Gramp. "And it better be good, Blackie."

CHAPTER XII

Mansion in the Sky

FAR in the stratosphere, with a serge-blue sky overhead and a cloud-misted Earth below, rode the Flying Island. Those who had fashioned it had worked with the lightest and strongest of metals and other materials.

First a traylike base of aluminum, a mile across and many yards thick. Upon this, like a multitude of masts upon a strange and intricate ship, countless hollow towers and spires of alloy, faced with gold-leaf for rust proofing and show. Rigged and braced with struts, wires and cables. Supported among these, like bubbles among mash weeds, clustered glass chambers of all sizes and shapes. These, despite the tinting and clouding against the Sun's rays, gave off rainbow flashes in all directions.

The largest chambers, centrally located, housed the mighty atomic engines that kept the Island constantly flying. Others contained the compressor pumps that laboriously turned the stratosphere into breathable air. There were storerooms for food and other supplies, and, in the outer and upper tiers, hangars for aircraft. Elsewhere were tiers of dormitories and living quarters, but these were occupied less frequently than any other chambers.

For in 1980 there were but twenty thousand Airmen to rule the world. Not even twenty thousand can be everywhere at once. Most of them filled police and command posts in the ring of the cities around Earth, but three thousand were always needed upon the Flying Island.

For the sake of survey, coordination, and to baffle and cow the imaginations of the subject millions, it must circle the globe once a day. It was a symbol, a threat, a legend, but it was also the most costly device in all the history of despotic government.

The towers were filled with watchers. Relaxation by one man of a single degree of alertness might cause the whole unwieldy mass to lose balance, topple and crash. Squadrons of observers must scan the empty sky, the misted Earth. Others must check gages, altimeters, feeds, level devices. Still others, a thousand at a time, must fuel, service and direct the intricate mass of flying machinery with perfect precision and care.

Without the make-up used during

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television appearances, Marshal Torridge was gray-templed, wan-faced, wrinkle-browed. His thin body was fragile inside its splendid uniform. Standing in a great central watch tower, peering through binoculars at a great port, he bit his mustached lip.

"Planes coming," he said to his two aides. "Flock of them. Every plane in the New York contingent. The girl who sneaked up here told the truth."

"It's Argyle, sir, attacking us?"

"Naturally it's Argyle. Who else could it be? And it must be an attack, as she said. No planes here in our hangars except bombers, eh?"

The aides shook their heads. For twenty years nobody had dreamt of conflict with other planes. Only punishment or reprisal was ever thought of, and then for a city of Earth, a defenseless bomb target.

"Then," ordered Torridge, "gather and arm all who are off duty. Let the rebels board. We don't want them bombing us. Let them show their hands. They'll expect us to be unready, but we won't be."

The aides moved swiftly away. Torridge looked at a chronometer. Half an hour, he judged, until those silver-bright wasps landed. By then they'd be just above New York City. Wonders could be done in that time. He turned to a glass table and pressed the switch on a radio communicator.

"Bring in that female prisoner."

AN Airman in captain's uniform brought Thora. She was paler than ever, but not frightened, and stood proudly in dun slacks and a woolen jacket. Her frosty blond hair was a little awry. Her green eyes did not flinch.

The marshal gestured her guard away.

"Young woman, when you stowed away on the New York supply craft yesterday and rushed into my presence with that bizarre story about danger of my overthrow, I was too preoccupied with your impudence in coming where we allow no ground people. I called you a fool and a liar and had you confined." His tired eyes turned again in the direction whence came Argyle's swarm of wasps. "Now I find that I was wrong. Why did you steal a ride up here at risk of your life and warn me?"

"Now that you believe, I'll explain," she replied. "General Argyle wants to become world ruler instead of you. He has put a certain man into prison. My hope is that this service will be repaid by giving that man freedom."

"A man in prison?" repeated Torridge. "Dangerous?"

"Probably the most dangerous man of all the ground people," said Thora proudly. "Dangerous, I mean, to you. He's a born and bred rebel. He feels outraged and murderous. The very name 'Airman' drives him into a fury. I ask you not to let that count. I have helped you. Now help me, and —the man I love."

"You rely on my sense of gratitude," observed Torridge. "I have none. Rulers cannot indulge in such luxuries. I should really be opening a trap in the floor of this Island and throwing you through it." He glanced again in the direction of Argyle's fleet. "You're an unusual person. You know what you want and no nonsense."

"I wish," said Thora, "that I could say the same for you and the rest of the Airmen."

Torridge stared in a manner that should have frozen her lips, but it did not succeed.

"Don't you think," she burst out, "that everyone knows what a farce this Flying Island is? You're desperate, overworked. The burden of world empire is too much for you. Marshal Torridge, you're an old man!"

"Old?" cried the greatest man on Earth. "I was old at thirty, when the War ended. I was ancient at forty, when the previous marshal died of heart strain and I replaced him. I'm fifty now and prehistoric. If it gives you any satisfaction, I want nothing so much as to quit."

"What is there to hang on to?" demanded Thora. "You distrust and fear your subject peoples, so you must engross them with bloody circus spectacles. You must import strange beasts for slaughter, when ordinary comforts are too difficult to get. You squeeze millions into cities like jails,

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and you stay up here as their jailer. You're a rider on a wild horse. You want to get off, but don't dare for fear you'll have your ribs kicked in. And that is due to happen. Argyle's almost upon you. I can see his planes plainly."

"My rule may be crumbling," agreed Torridge. "Stand by and watch my attempts to prop it up."

The wasp-swarm of Argyle's planes approached the Flying Island. Argyle, his plane central in the formation, spoke into his radio.

"Hello, hangars! This is General Argyle. Prepare to help us land."

No response, but the hangars were open, big bottle-like chambers. The planes flew in and came to rest. No attendants stood there. Wondering, some of the pilots emerged and touched the buttons that would close the doors and admit breathable air.

Argyle, whose original plan had been to make prisoners of the hangar attendants, had to change his plans now. He assembled his men in a main crystal-walled promenade just inside. Five hundred planes had brought two thousand men. They were all armed, as Torridge's men would not be. He conferred with a brace of lieutenants.

"Remember that they outnumber us, but most of them can't leave their posts. Whatever happens, this Island has to keep flying. What we chiefly want is Torridge. Don't capture him. Kill him. Then his boys will have to come in with us."

"Argyle!" called the voice of Torridge.

From the far end of the corridor, where a deeper glass-clouding made something like a shadow, the voice echoed to the growing group of invaders. Argyle faced it, saw a slender, richly uniformed figure.

"This is luck!" he whispered. "There he is, come to meet us all by himself." From among those nearest to him he selected the dozen men he came fairly close to trusting. "Come on. Don't draw guns until I speak. We're going to wipe outTorridge here and now." He and his party moved toward the marshal. "Glad you came out, sir. How did you know it was I?"

"A stowaway came up from New York yesterday," said Torridge. "A blond, pale girl, with a fantastic yarn about how you planned to overthrow me."

The tones were genial, but Argyle started and chewed on his cigarette holder. Was Torridge informed and ready? If so, why was he here alone and apparently unprotected?

"I know that girl, sir," Argyle improvised quickly. "She's insane. The fact that she came up here as a stowaway proves that. She knows what happens to ground people who disobey orders."

"Never fear, Argyle, I have her safe," assured Torridge.

They were quite close now. At a stealthy motion from Argyle, the party came to a halt not more than twenty yards away. Not one of them but could kill with a snap pistol shot at that range. Argyle saluted and Torridge returned the salute. His gay uniform seemed to shimmer.

"Marshal Torridge," said Argyle heavily, "I come to make an important statement."

"Ah," breathed Torridge, "does that statement happen to be that you intend to overthrow and replace me, Argyle? Because I disagree that the girl we mentioned is insane. I take her for very sane indeed and so I have prepared for you."

"Draw your pistols!" Argyle rasped. "Cover him!"

A DOZEN weapons swept from their holsters, focused on Marshal Torridge. He did not flinch, move to retreat or resist. One eyebrow lifted. A slender hand slid a monocle under it.

"Now you expose your hand, Argyle," he taunted. "I am glad. My preparations have not been in vain. I can fight and kill you with the most cheerful of hearts."

"Fire!" roared Argyle.

The pistols all boomed together. Every bullet must have struck the target, yet Torridge only smiled. He shrugged.

"I see that a simple device has baffled you, Argyle."

"Then take this!"

Argyle threw a grenade, powered

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with a crumb of atomic power. As it whirled through the air, every man of his party fell on his face for safety. The grenade's explosion shook and rang the glass chamber. Silence, and then the quiet laugh of Torridge.

Argyle scrambled erect. Torridge stood where he had been standing, not at all disturbed.

"I'm not really here, Argyle. I'm in my command post. A television ray focus, with the dust notes of the air as screen, places my image where you shoot at it, and a television return shows you to me. You've often seen me thus at the circus and elsewhere, but in your single-minded greed for conquest, you didn't stop to think." Torridge's voice grew grim. "If you want to fight now, I am ready to accommodate you. Winner takes the Island and the power and the glory. Loser takes a long drop and a long, long rest."

"Prepare for action!" Argyle bawled. "Run back to the others, some of you. Deploy, hold these outer chambers and corridors—"

Another explosion seemed to smash the great fabric of glass and metal. Argyle heard the roar of escaping air, tried to run to safety somewhere. A moment later he collapsed, panting and wheezing and strangling. His swimming brain presented him a strange vision—the face of Blackie Peyton. Then he subsided into senseless darkness.

CHAPTER XIII

Fall and Downfall

HIGH up against the Sun, hidden in the torrent of its beams, Gramp and Peyton watched from their cockpit as Wertz carried out orders. The Flying Island, swimming in from the east, had been met and swarmed over by Argyle's air legion. So intent upon triumph had Argyle been that he did not look for, even if he could see, any third party in the sky.

The two makeshift stratosphere craft went undiscovered as the Flying Island drew into position a few minutes from New York. Then Wertz pluckily dived. Gramp and Peyton saw him bail out in his parachute, a figure no larger than a spider in respirator and rags. The plane struck among the rainbow bubble chambers and the Island rocked with the mighty discharge of its cargo of atomic cylinders. Among the towers appeared a jagged hole.

Gramp went into a dive. So swift did the great, soaring Island travel that it had already slid from under the downward plunge of Wertz's parachute.

"He'll land somewhere on Long Island," observed Gramp at the controls. "By the time he finds his way home, it'll be all settled."

Peyton said nothing, strapped his own oxygen mask in place. The Island blotted out the faraway world below. Gramp sent them smoothly into the hole made by the explosion. They smacked home between two high towers, felt the crunch of their craft as it broke up, quickly scrambled out. They stood on the dangerously cracked and shattered floor of half a corridor, inside what had once been the outer tier of glass hangars. Around them was cluttered the wreckage of many metal planes.

Peyton felt puffy. His ears roared. For twenty years he had dwelt under the pressure of the Pit. Now he moved clumsily over broken glass in the scant pressure of the stratosphere. Gramp was beside him, pulling at his elbow and pointing ahead.

The punctured corridor was full of struggling, smothering Airmen, trying to fight their way through transparent doors into the breathable interior. Many were falling and collapsing. Gramp paused to snatch a pistol from a holster, and Peyton did the same. They ran along the corridor.

The interior of the Island could be seen through many glass partitions. Men and machines moved back there. Peyton, faint despite his oxygen mask, gained a doorway and reached for the catch. But Gramp caught his arm again, pointed to a fallen figure.

It was General Argyle.

They bent, caught him up and be-

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tween them hurried him through the door they had found. The pressure of inner air slammed it shut behind them. Breathing heavily, Argyle partially recovered. He tried to rise from the crystal floor, but Peyton pinned him down with one foot. He and Gramp ripped off their masks.

"We haven't any time to lose," rapped Peyton. "Where's the control machinery?"

Argyle blinked up at him.

"This is silly. You can't be Peyton. You—"

Peyton hoisted him erect and dug the stolen pistol into his belly.

"The controls. Tell us where."

"Shoot me," dared Argyle. "Ground people can't order Airmen around."

Peyton and Gramp had the same impulse. They seized Argyle and rushed him along a corridor, past rival detachments of Airmen who were sniping at each other. Somewhere resounded the *hiss* and *throb* of a mighty atomic power mechanism. Heading for it, they slipped and went down a ramp, all three together. Argyle fought for a gun, but Gramp pistol-whipped him.

THEY got to their feet just outside the biggest chamber yet—a domed apartment as big as an old-fashioned metropolitan station. Tier above tier rose the machinery that held and drove the gigantic vehicle. The door was locked. They shot it open with bullets and charged through.

"Here's what we want," said Gramp. He covered a wan Airman just inside. "Up with your hands, or I drill you."

"You can't do this," protested the Airman. "I steer. This television—"

Gramp stared at the little screen, shouldered the man away. Peyton, holding the bewildered Argyle with one hand, caught the television steersman with the other. Gramp put his hands on two levers that were like bicycle handlebars. They responded delicately to his touch.

"These must keep an even keel," he decided. "I see New York in the screen. Are we just above her?"

"Of course," babbled their new prisoner. "Who are you? What's all the noise about?"

"Argyle and his stooges are trying to take this Island away from you," Peyton informed him. "Neither side is going to have it. We're landing you."

"Landing us?" echoed the steersman in terror. "But you—you can't!" He raised his voice. "Help! Help!"

Peyton saw that the chamber and its machinery-lined floors swarmed with Airmen. Several looked up. A number trembled at their work. But none answered the appeal. They dared not leave their tasks.

"Six minutes beyond New York, you say, Blackie?" queried Gramp. "Here's a map with the course marked. This lake—"

"That's the one," said Peyton. "Think you can make this white elephant land there?"

"I can make her stop flying," replied Gramp. "That's enough, eh?"

The steersman snatched at Peyton's pistol. Peyton shot him in the kneecap and he fell sobbing. Then Peyton forced Argyle down on a bench of glass and tubular steel. The sound of battle was growing muffled outside. Someone bustled in. Peyton recognized Marshal Torridge.

"What has happened?" burst out Torridge. "Who are you men?"

"Sit down beside Argyle there," Peyton ordered. "We're going to take you down to Earth."

Gramp was tugging upon a great lever that was wired to a metal bulkhead.

"C a r e f u l!" screamed Torridge. "That's the power cut-off! If you pull it down—"

"That's all I wanted to know," announced Gramp.

An expanse of water showed on the vision screen. He ripped the lever from its fastenings and forced it to the floor. Instantly all the machinery went dead and silent.

The Flying Island was flying no more. Down it drifted, like a falling leaf. Peyton felt light on his feet. It was as though he rode in a swiftly descending elevator. Fifteen miles down! He fancied that the time would pass quickly. Sixteen feet the first second, thirty-two the next, sixty-four the third—

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"Spin that wheel gage!" Torridge thundered at Gramp. "You want us all to smash up?"

GRAMP spun the device indicated, then faced Torridge.

"You mean that this will let us down easy? Some kind of brake blast below, eh?" He turned a quizzical eye on Peyton. "What do you think of that, Blackie?"

Their fall was slowing. The men who had labored at the machines now deserted their posts and converged on the little group at the controls. Their faces were deadly. Gramp averted the new disaster. He leveled his gun at Torridge.

"Stand easy, every one of you!" he shrilled. "Rush us and I let the marshal have it right through the conk!"

Peyton saw men rushing from without. He covered Argyle.

"No funny business from the other side!" he warned. "If there is, Argyle will be first to die."

They descended in grim silence through many hundred yards of space.

"This is a trifle swift to follow," said Torridge finally. "I take it that you two aren't part of Argyle's raid."

"Not we," Peyton assured him. "And not part of your defense, either. We come from the ground."

"Ground!" muttered Argyle. "I should have known it would happen! Ungrateful scum, rising against us—"

"As you rose against me," put in Torridge. "There aren't enough Airmen for a difference of opinion, Argyle. If you had been content to stay on as commander at New York, probably you would have taken my place in a very short while. As it is, we're both through." He yawned. "I feel tired."

"The ground people did this to me!" raged Argyle. "First Thora, bearing tales to you, now these two renegades! And what's happening down below?"

The question was rhetorical. Nobody bothered to answer it. From the packed observers a voice spoke.

"Marshal Torridge, say the word and we'll rush these pirates!"

"Rush nobody," directed Torridge, relaxing on the bench beside Argyle. "Gentlemen, I think we are assisting at the end of an era. Our safety mechanism will keep us from smashing below, but once it's down, this Island will never fly again. That means the finish of the Airmen."

"I'm glad you realize that," said Gramp.

"I won't admit it!" snapped Argyle. "Torridge, we have one more chance. Let's join forces. When we come down, we'll march into New York somehow, crush whatever silly rebellion these two represent—"

"How crush it?" inquired Torridge gently. "As I understand, all your planes came up to help in the stroke against me. They will not be damaged, but the impact of landing will certainly set off all the atomic energy they still contain. Until more is brought them, they are useless. And I feel certain that without planes we will fail to subjugate New York."

"You admit defeat at the hands of ground-grubbers?" exploded Argyle.

[*Turn page*]

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For answer, Torridge gestured toward Peyton and Gramp.

"Here are two of that gentry who have brought both our forces to nothing," he said. Once more he yawned and spoke to Peyton. "Will you be amazed to hear that I begin to feel relief?"

Peyton shook his head. "You look worn out to me. Now that you know the job of flying this Island is off your hands, maybe you'd like to stretch out and take a nap."

TORRIDGE looked wistful.

"I'd better stay awake and see the finish. It will be a great joke on the person left in the position of victor. Do you realize, gentlemen, that with the ruling out of this Flying Island, the whole fabric of our government is at an end?"

"I'm glad you admit that," said Peyton.

"I would be fatuous to admit otherwise. You must understand this much. The Island was a needle that drew a daily thread through the necklace of Earth's cities. They are now just so many spilled beads. Each has masses of people and a contingent of Airmen in command, who will not know what happened elsewhere. Some of our planes could span the distances between the cities, but I doubt if any of our pilots are trained highly enough to make it. Each community is cut off from all the others."

"Speak for yourselves, you Airmen," growled Gramp. "Who says nobody can navigate? I could fly anywhere a ship will take me, if I have a map and a compass and a quadrant. Why, fifty years ago—"

"You can?" Torridge pointed a finger at Argyle. "There you have it. Our governing activities have forced us into narrow ruts. We lost skills and abilities and forgot that wise old men like this still existed."

Argyle was thinking of something else. Peyton's gun muzzle had drooped. Argyle gathered his booted feet under him, and sprang. His tactics were copied from Peyton himself. His left hand caught Peyton's gun wrist. His right hand doubled into a bunch of knuckles and smote Peyton's jaw. A moment later he had twisted the gun away and was beating Peyton over the head with it.

"I win!" he yelled through the broken door. "This is Argyle! Come help me, rebels!"

Somebody rushed in, somebody slender and with streaming blond hair. Thora, forgotten in the confusion, had escaped from her prison. She caught Argyle around the neck from behind. A moment later Peyton wrenched himself free and walloped the general. Argyle wilted down through Thora's arms.

She turned an utterly bewildered face from one person to another.

"Whatever is happening?" she begged. "Outside there was a fight starting. Airmen were bustling around, asking each other 'For Torridge or Argyle?' and then shooting. Now they're all crouched in corners, behind furniture, with their eyes bulging out."

"They know what you fail to realize," Torridge informed her. "The Flying Island has finished its flight. It is settling down to rest like a tired beetle." He glanced at an instrument board. "That gage says we are ready to land now."

And land they did, with an abrupt shock and a mighty splash, in the shallowed waters of Lake Hopatcong. Few kept their feet. Peyton and Thora sat down suddenly, clinging to each other. Gramp clung to the handlebar levers, maintaining his upright position.

"How's that for landing a contraption I never even handled before?" he piped in shrill triumph. "All I did was keep the lake in the vision screen and—"

Peyton got up.

"Outside," he warned loudly, "will be my men—a large force, armed and ready. If you do as I say, nobody will be hurt. Drop your arms here and march out with your hands up. Wade to the shore and give yourselves up."

Blank faces regarded him on all sides. Marshal Torridge spoke with animation for the first time.

"Don't you hear what your new commanding officer says? Do what he tells you. Down weapons up hands, march out—lively!"

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CHAPTER XIV

Loose Ends

BENGALI, pallid and weary, dismissed the last fumbling and fuming work committee from his office. It was a fine office in the same building that housed the Pardon Board, vastly different from the hidden den behind the Underways bar, or the gravelike hiding among the pilings. One more person entered. Bengali sighed and smiled.

"Come in, Blackie," he said. "You're the first man I've been glad to see today. The fighting's over, but the figuring's started."

"That fighting was a disappointment," commented Peyton, sitting down. "You face something big and tough, thinking you'll die game. But after a couple of licks, it keels over. It was like a dream."

"Right. And the figuring's like another kind of dream. You run into something small and slender and harmless, and all of a sudden it swells up into tremendous trouble. I think I'd throw it over, Blackie, if they'd let me."

He referred to his notes.

"The representations to other towns, for instance. I put that in the hands of Gramp Hooker. He'll fly a plane to lead the way around the world, where the Flying Island used to sail. Torridge—thank heaven we saved him alive—will confer with the administrators in each town as they come to it. I can imagine how hard the idea will be to communicate."

"Nothing to how hard it will be to sell," returned Blackie Peyton. "Speaking of Torridge, you're beginning to look like him—worn out and jumpy."

"He hated government business. Anybody who does that isn't bad at bottom, no matter how fancy a uniform he wears. It's the men who love glory and power, like Argyle, who are to be feared and fought. About the other towns—people will be glad to hear about it, once it trickles through. We can go slowly in introducing the

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world to freedom. Better slow than never."

Peyton smiled savagely.

"Speaking of Argyle, do me a favor. Send him down into the Pit to smash atoms."

"Not a chance," demurred Bengali. "There's a lever control mechanism that will do the work down there without man power. The Airmen perfected it years ago, even installed it; but atom-smashing was too good a punishment for rebellious ground people. I've already ordered that mechanism to start."

"At least tell Argyle that he's headed for the Pit," urged Peyton. "The thought will be almost as tough on him as the work."

"I'll do that." Bengali scribbled a note on a pad. "As for the currency situation—"

"Going to abolish money?" queried Peyton. "Most reformers want to."

Again Bengali shook his head.

"There's a group of executives and experts figuring on it. No manipulators or gamblers. They're blocking out a plan to base exchange values on labor and commodities, not on any metal that, taken alone, is worth nothing. Money's no good if you can't buy things with it and an honest government doesn't need a guarantee. We plan to be a really honest government."

"Too deep for me," confessed Peyton. He helped himself from a cigarette box in front of Bengali. "Hey, these are real tobacco!"

"Everybody will have real tobacco before long," Bengali told him. "Real coffee, too, and those other things you missed. Wertz has tramped in. We're putting him in charge of a fleet of big atomic-powered air vessels to go South after such things. What can't be found growing wild will be planted for harvest next year." He picked up more scribbled notes. "Now give me advice."

"What about?"

"That girl, Thora. She's applied for a job."

Peyton had put the cigarette into his mouth. He snapped it out again.

"Job? What kind of job?"

"We hope to reclaim the wilderness. The Airmen didn't want anything there before. They preferred to keep people in cities like this, or in nearby farms, easier to put a thumb on. But already people are demanding to get back to the land. I'm organizing a squad to send out to Jersey. We'll use that grounded Flying Island as a sort of living headquarters and supply-house around which to clear land and plant crops. First we'll drop parachute men with axes to make a landing field. Later garden patches. Finally—"

"And Thora wants to go on that?" Peyton demanded. "That girl? She doesn't know the first thing about farming!"

"Thanks for those kind words, Mr. Peyton," said Thora, walking in from a rear office.

She wore a rich blue dress, but had pinned paper cuffs over the sleeves and stuck a pencil into her back hair. Her hands were full of papers.

"Here's a partial list of what I want to fly in the first day, Bengali. We figure to be self-supporting the first season and show a profit the second. That is, if these volunteer farmers will really work." She studied Peyton, whose mouth had not closed after removing the cigarette. "As for Mr. Peyton there—"

"Pierce to you, Thora," he told her.

"Miss Thora to you, Mr. Peyton. As for Mr. Peyton, since when did he get to know so much about farming as to suggest—"

"My dad was a farmer!" snapped Peyton.

"So was mine!" she flung back.

"Bengali," said Peyton to the man at the desk, "cross her off the list and give me that farm detail. I can run it. You know I can handle workers and that I can be trusted."

"As if," said Thora icily, "I can't handle workers or be trusted."

Bengali glanced from one to the other.

"I'm going to send you both out there," he said at last. "The fresh air and hard work will do you good. I don't want two of you arguing together here, or one of you moping alone. Now take your debate somewhere else. I'm going to be busy all day and all night."

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THORA hurried into the rear room. Peyton sprang after her. He caught her just outside the door.

"What idiot said you can trust no future?" he cried. "Thora, we'll make a future we can trust—our own future!"

"Let me go, Mr. Peyton," pleaded Thora in smothered tones. "This is no way to start a farming partnership. Let go, Pierce! Gramp, where are you? Why don't you take a hand in this and get me out of this wild man's clutches?"

Gramp, at a paper-littered desk of his own, goggled like a bearded owl, then chuckled like a bearded kingfisher.

"Because I'm going on eighty-three," he replied. "Dern it!"

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PLANTS MUST GROW

By

FRANK BELKNAP LONG

Author of "Two Against Neptune," "White Barrier," etc.

When a Weird Uranian Shrub Is Stolen by Jewel Thieves, Curator Carstairs Has to Rescue the Thieves From Their Loot!

CARSTAIRS yawned. Vera Dorn stopped typing and raised incredulous blue eyes. Her expression said as plain as words:

"You don't deserve your job, John Carstairs. Here we are, surrounded by exotic living, breathing and walking plants from all over the Solar System, and you're bored stiff!"

Carstairs regretted that he had not told her to go home. She was cataloguing Venusian plateau spores for him and humming to herself, as though she hadn't a care in the world. Having majored in botany at a blue stocking university and wangled a job at the Interplanetary Botanical Gardens, she thought herself the luckiest young lady in the eastern United States. It seemed incredible to her that Carstairs, who had an even better job, could ever be bored.

Carstairs knew that besides cataloguing spores, she was mentally making a list of his assets and shortcomings. Not every young man of twenty-eight could draw a salary of seven thousand a year for the privilege of doing exactly as he pleased.

A wet, clabbery membrane covered his head, clung tightly to his temples

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As curator of the Gardens, Carstairs could spend his mornings amid blooms gorgeous and exotic beyond an orchid collector's wildest dreams. His afternoons he spent with grotesque marine plants from the primeval oceans of the great outer planets. He could walk through the green-lit tank rooms and stare at marvels undreamt of by his own grandfather, who had watched the first space ship take off from the High Sierras in 1973, and returned to sea-level, muttering:

"I'll stick to planes for awhile."

On the liability side of the ledger, Vera Dorn was unquestionably listing his moodiness, the tragic instability of temperament which filled him with zest and high enthusiasm one moment and then plunged him into the depths. Fortunately in his "down" moments he didn't feel depressed, just bored.

He was a botanist to his fingertips, but there were times when he wished something would happen in the Gardens that wasn't tied up with leaf cuttings, cleft graftings, root prunings, and night soil testings.

His very clothes were impregnated with exotic soils and composts. Guano loam for frail fungus growths from dark Pluto. Peat compost for hybrids of terrestrial and asteroidal shoots. Black mud drained from the Saturnian tidal basins for the delicate umbrella-ferns of the Ringed Planet. Purple clay from Neptune for the Sea King's pipe-line progeny.

Whenever he uncovered the moist loam above a pipe-line plant, he had to damp out his imagination. The plant reminded him of a Gargantuan blood-red grave worm, bloated, glistening—

VERA DORN paused abruptly in her typing.

"There seems to be a misprint in this listing," she complained. "Number Fifteen reads: 'Maculata, plateau, hardy, continuous blooming, petals somewhat fringed.' Shouldn't it read —"

Carstairs stared at her moodily, admiring the provocative carriage of her head and the way her coppery hair coiled about the nape of her neck. She wasn't pretty, exactly, but she was a woman of animation and intelligence. Her presence beside him was more disturbing than he admitted.

"Cover up that machine," he ordered. "We're calling it a day. I'm going home to sink my teeth in a nice, juicy murder novel."

Vera Dorn frowned. "If you like to read about people being rayed out of existence, why don't you join the Interplanetary Patrol?"

"Did it ever occur to you that outside these Gardens there is a larger world where things *happen?*" retorted Carstairs. "Can you blame me for seeking vicarious thrills when all we do is—"

A dull concussion suddenly shook the filing room. Carstairs jumped up with an alarmed cry.

"That sounded like an explosion!" he exclaimed. "It was too near to have come from anything but the Stove!"

Vera Dorn stared at him, aghast.

"The Stove? Then the Diamond Plant has kept its promise!"

"What in blue blazes are you talking about?"

"I'm merely quoting you, pal. You said there was something about the Diamond Plant which promised trouble. An awful, pent-up something, as though its energies were getting ready to boil over."

"Yeah," he grunted. "I made the mistake of thinking out loud. Vera, stay anchored to that desk. Do you hear? I'm going into the Stove alone."

The Plant Stove was the largest of the fourteen buildings which made the Interplanetary Gardens the most imposing Botanical exhibit on Earth. It was no different from a greenhouse, except for one thing. It had triple rows of ten-inch hot water pipes running up from its staging to its span roof, instead of the double flow-and-return four-inch pipes which warmed the other buildings.

Carstairs emerged from the Administration Building with his heart in his throat. Racing down a narrow gravel walk, he tore into the glass corridor which led to the Stove.

The catastrophe was even more horrible than he had feared. The guard, James Seabrook, was down on the

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concrete floor of the Stove, groaning and writhing in the toils of a cast-off tentacle. He had thrown his right arm across his face to protect his eyes from the blinding incandescence of the still exploding horror. There was no sign of the Diamond Plant itself. Where the great growth had stood yawned empty air.

Carstairs knew he had one chance in five thousand of tearing away the blackened, smoking tentacle without burning the flesh from his palms. But he did not stop to brood over his chances, or weigh the heaviness of the odds which somebody's carelessness had stacked against him. He fell to his knees beside the prostrate guard, tugged and wrenched at the horror with all his strength, his breath coming in heaving gasps.

Fortunately the tentacle had stopped exploding. Although the heat seared Carstairs' palms and lanced upward toward his elbows, there was no longer any incandescence to blind him. He merely seemed to be grasping exploding match boxes in both hands. The agony sickened him.

AFTER what seemed like an eternity, the pain eased a little and the tentacle ceased to squirm. With a convulsive effort he untwined the loathsome thing, his fingers tearing off charred chunks. Seabrook helped him by rolling over and raising himself on his elbows.

The freed tentacle smelled like burnt rubber. With a grunt of revulsion, Carstairs threw it into a heap of leaf mold and staggered to his feet. Instantly his wobbly knees carried him into the circular pit where the Diamond Plant had reared itself to the roof span.

Bottom heat arose from between coconut fibers all about him, drying the sweat on his forehead. He stood staring through a wavering film, watching Seabrook get up. The guard's hair was scorched and his features seemed all wrenched apart.

"That was white of you, sir," he groaned. "I was almost gone. They lifted the plant out on pulleys, sir. See, up there? They smashed the glass and lifted it out while I was trying to break loose from a half-Nelson."

Carstairs looked up. The roof span was a mass of splintered glass, through which red sunlight poured. Jagged shadows danced on the wall sashes and astragals overhead. Gone was the equalization of light which had filled the Stove with a diffuse, mellow radiance.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Carstairs.

"One of the tentacles exploded while they were lifting it out, sir. The one who was holding me jumped back a split-second before it whipped around me. They got clean away, sir—with the plant!"

"Are you burnt badly, Seabrook?"

The guard shook his head. "Only my arms, sir. That asbestos shirt you gave me came in handy."

"Better put on some carron oil," Carstairs advised. "Second-degree burns are dangerous."

"You'll be needing some of that yourself, sir."

Ten minutes later a white-faced Carstairs was back in the filing room, an audio-visiphone cupped in his bandaged right hand. Vera Dorn sat before her typewriter, drumming out commas with one finger and staring at him levelly over the machine.

"So you're keeping it on the q.t., as far as little Vera is concerned," she said caustically.

He glared at her. "Stop pounding on that machine. In ten seconds flat I'll be talking to an inspector of police. I promise to talk loud, so you won't miss a thing."

"Oh, thank you."

"Don't mention it. Inspector McGuire?"

IN the audio-visiphone an angry face had appeared amid opalescent flickerings. Inspector McGuire was a square-jawed, gimlet-eyed man, a little over forty, with flecks of gray in his hair and a voice that sounded like an outraged horn.

'What is this, Mr. Carstairs? Can't you see me?"

"The image plate was foggy," Carstairs explained. "It's getting clearer now."

"It's plenty clear at this end,"

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rapped McGuire. "I can see him as clearly as I can see you."

"Him?"

"Old Man Trouble. He's standing right at your elbow. What is it this time, Mr. Curator? Has one of your walking plants taken a powder?"

"I'm sorry, Inspector, but this is serious. Some very foolish crooks broke into the Plant Stove and stole our most valuable specimen."

"What would that be? I'm no mind-reader, Mr. Carstairs."

"They stole the carbon-eating Diamond Plant from Uranus."

"Huh? What's that? You mean to say—"

"The crazy fools must have taken seriously the newspaper nonsense that's been decorating the front pages."

"Newspaper nonsense? I thought that plant was worth its weight in platinum. You mean it *doesn't* turn out diamonds?"

"It turns out diamonds, all right—big, beautiful stones that weigh five hundred carats. But you couldn't sell them for ten cents in any man's money."

"I don't get it."

"Inspector, the plant eats pure carbon and subjects it to a terrific pressure. Its internal energies would give a cyclotron an inferiority complex. But the best it can do with carbon isn't good enough. You get diamonds, sure. Technically, any crystalline aggregate which yields carbon dioxide when burnt in oxygen, converts soft iron into steel and is insoluble in acids is a diamond. But that doesn't mean it's the kind of diamond you'd want your wife to wear at the Two Hundred Club. The Diamond Plant excretes 'shot bort' diamonds. They're large, but nearly structureless."

A look of relief spread across McGuire's face.

"It does, eh? Then all you've lost is a specimen."

"That's all we've lost, Inspector. Getting that plant from Uranus to Earth set the Gardens back forty thousand bucks. We had to build a special Stove in the expedition ship so it could regrow the tentacle it threw around our best field man on Uranus. He's lying under lichenous clay on the northeastern plains simply because he wanted the Gardens to have the rarest, most formidable plant in the System. But, as you say, it's only a specimen."

"I—I thought that collector fellow was killed when one of your rocket tubes backflared," faltered McGuire.

"That's what we told the reporters. How many of your secrets do you give to the press? If you're interested, Washington has a complete report. Look under File Twenty, Spaceway Mortality Docket, July Second, Two Thousand Twenty-three."

"I'm a policeman, not a scientist," rapped McGuire. "I'm sorry the poor devil was killed, but from our point of view it's still a specimen."

"A very dangerous specimen," corrected Carstairs. "Do you know what happens when you pick up a glass snake?"

"Am I supposed to be a snakeologist now?"

"Although the glass snake is really a lizard, it looks exactly like a snake. When you pick it up, its tail snaps off and twines around your hand."

"Well?"

"The Diamond Plant is a little like a glass snake. If you jar or tilt it, a tentacle snaps off and explodes. If you happen to be standing close, the tentacle whips around you and goes on exploding until it burns itself out."

THE inspector seemed taken aback. His hand came into view and wiped sweat from his forehead.

"How many tentacles has that plant got?" he gulped.

"Twenty-seven. Three of them snapped off in the Stove before we could get the plant established in a seed bed of flaked graphite. One of them missed me by inches. Just now I rescued the guard from another, which snapped off when the crooks were lifting out nothing but a specimen."

"Good Lord!"

"Inspector, those crooks think they're going to be diamond brokers. Instead they'll turn into impure diamonds themselves. You can get quite a lot of carbon out of human tissues."

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McGuire's hand stayed on his forehead.

"But why aren't they lying dead outside the greenhouse now?" he asked.

"Because they didn't jar the plant more than once. Apparently they're intelligent crooks. They knew it couldn't be jarred, so they lifted it out on pulleys and carted it away in a cushioned truck."

"Where were you all that time—asleep?" demanded the inspector. "Haven't you more than one guard down there?"

"We were just closing up," Carstairs explained. "Most of the guards were punching time clocks in the basement of the Administration Building. The man at the gate let the truck in because we have seed trucks driving up all the time."

"And now you want your killer plant back, eh?"

"Inspector, about all you can do is notify me the instant it does kill. You'll get a phone call saying three smart crooks have been found dead, seared to a crisp, and will the police please look into it."

"You sound pretty sure of it."

"I know that plant from its wide, crawling base to its vicious summit. It won't take this lying down."

"Crawling? You mean to say that plant can move about?"

"We had to anchor it to the graphite bed with wires. Don't you read the papers? The crooks cut the wires successfully, but their luck can't hold. You see, Inspector, we've worked out a sort of protective routine here to guard against mishaps. I had the guards put on asbestos shirts and take other precautions."

"I get it. You're offering to help us capture that plant when we send the morgue-gyro for three charred stiffs."

"You'll *need* my help, Inspector."

"All right, all right. Where'll I find you, say, around midnight?"

"I'm staying right here until that little specimen gets homesick. You might try broadcasting a warning to those smart crooks as an act of mercy."

McGuire swallowed. "If I wasn't an inspector of police, I'd drive down to the Gardens in a seed truck myself. But I wouldn't lift out a single plant. The truck would be loaded with nitroglycerine."

Slowly his embittered Irish features dimmed. When Carstairs hung up, his face was flushed and his eyes were shining. He wasn't bored any more.

VERA DORN sat staring at him over her typewriter, her expression scornful.

"Nothing ever happens around here," she said, and started typing out commas again.

Carstairs began pacing the file room, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his rubbertex horticulture smock. His slightly gaunt but handsome face seemed almost boyish now. The look of mingled anxiety and eagerness in his gaze did something to Vera Dorn. Her expression softened. She arose quietly and fell into step beside him. Instantly he stopped pacing.

"You think I'm slightly wacky, don't you?" he asked, frowning.

"Why should I think that?"

"Because you're so under-emotional. The theft of that plant isn't even a challenge to you. You'd be perfectly satisfied if all our specimens were dahlias and daisies."

"That isn't true," she denied. "My pride ties into excited knots when I think that in another ten years we'll have specimens even more strange and wonderful than the Diamond Plant. I've spent my entire afternoon between the desert and the sea, far out in space. Oh, sure, I was sitting here typing, but my mind? My mind was on a sandy beach, watching the Sun come up like fog over Neptune. Far out I could see flame-tongued flowers unfolding, white mole weeds crawling upward from a thousand-foot tidal zone."

"It's hard to believe you're really like that," he protested suspiciously.

"Would you be convinced if I kissed you?"

"What—what did you say?"

"You're in love with me, aren't you? I've been sitting here day after day, watching you. If I were just a cold

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fish, would you feel that way about me?"

For a moment the expression on Carstairs' face was sheer wonder. He took a step toward her, but before he could take her into his arms, the audio-visiphone on his desk started clicking.

Almost savagely Carstairs swung about and uncradled the receiver. On the little round screen, the inspector's face stared at him accusingly.

"Your hunch turned out pat," he growled. "They were hiding out over an autogyro garage on East Thirty-fourth Street, Third Level Manhattan. Carstairs, I'm not as cold-blooded as you scientific fellows. I don't think a vicious killer plant is worth the lives of two men. They weren't murderers. All they did was steal a vicious plant that should never have been uprooted in the first place."

"Two?" Carstairs gasped. "Seabrook says that three men broke into—"

"My count is two," said McQuire. "Maybe the third guy ducked, or something."

Carstairs took a deep breath.

"How badly were they burnt, Inspector?"

"You want to gloat over the gruesome details, eh?"

"No, no. Skip it. All I want is the address of that garage. Tell your men to keep their distance until I can get over there with a can of ether."

McGuire's face got tight and hard.

"You'll have to find your blasted plant before you can give it rosy dreams."

"Find it?" echoed Carstairs, horrified.

"That's what I said. It's loose somewhere in the city, Mr. Curator. Your vicious killer plant, loose in a city of twenty million people who are *not* criminals!"

CARSTAIRS' jaw muscles twitched and the veins on his forehead stood out like cords.

"Inspector, there's something I should have told you. We've been keeping that plant stunted by feeding it ore containing not more than forty percent graphite. On Uranus, Diamond Plants reach a height of four hundred feet!"

McGuire's jaw fell open.

"On Uranus, they grow hundreds of tentacles, but that's not what I'm afraid of," continued Carstairs relentlessly. "On Uranus, they sometimes explode. A full-grown Diamond Plant could blow the Third Level clear into space."

"But it couldn't grow overnight," McGuire pleaded hopefully.

"It could, it does, if it gets pure carbon. You've got to find it before then."

"The Third Level is honeycombed with graphite lubricating plants," the inspector muttered.

"You'd better throw out a dragnet. Put your entire force on it, sound a general alarm. If that plant rebeds itself in the sluices and feasts for eight hours, New York will be a two-level town. It can scent carbon ten miles away."

McGuire nodded grimly. "I'll do what I can. If the Third Level goes, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes, Mr. Curator."

When Carstairs hung up, he looked so ill that Vera Dorn became alarmed.

"Steady, darling," she soothed. "It takes twenty hours for that plant to grow to its full height."

"I know, but—"

"How could it get into a lubricating plant? All the power stations are heavily guarded."

"That's why I didn't warn McGuire straight off," Carstairs said. "I didn't realize that East Thirty-fourth Street is a dark, cluttered maze of alleyways and gyro parking lots. It may take them hours to locate that plant and meanwhile—Vera, if you were starving, would you let a guard stand in your way?"

"But you're talking about a plant."

"An intelligent plant, Vera. That's another thing I didn't tell McGuire."

The audio-visiphone was clicking again. This time the inspector blurted his sentences, like a man who has to tell about a nightmare, drink his coffee and catch a train, all within two minutes.

"It's in a lubricating plant, Mr. Curator. Intrenched in the sluices

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behind the biggest power turbine in Manhattan. Yeah, the East River Twister. Now what do we do?"

"Has anyone been injured?"

"No, just killed. Five employees of the plant. That vicious plant has only twenty tentacles left now, but I think it means to grow more. Can you save the Third Level, Mr. Curator? How's your bag of tricks this evening?"

McGuire's voice quavered hysterically. It seemed shocking somehow, considering that he was supposed to be a hard-boiled police officer. Carstairs' face had grown whiter, but there was a cold determination in his eyes.

"I'll take care of it, Inspector," he promised, and hung up.

ALTHOUGH Carstairs was reluctant to waste a single second, he had no intention of rushing blindly into danger. Vera Dorn's advice, he decided, was easily worth a minute of his time in any emergency, and this one was a calamity. Pushing her typewriter to one side, he parked himself on her desk, crossed his legs and fumbled in his vest for a cigarette.

"All we have are scattered notes," he said. "We can't check on it as though it were a problem in ballistics. None of our field men ever saw a Diamond Plant in bloom. But from a dozen observations, all made on Uranus by pitchblende miners who thought our boys were ticky in the coco, we know there are times when—"

Vera nodded, caught at his words. "You don't have to tell me. I've memorized those notes from Aagesen to Zwolle. Our runaway plant isn't just a physical menace. The miners say it *buds* when it moves out of the Uranian Badlands and roams about, grazing on pure carbon. Are you afraid it will reproduce itself?"

Carstairs shook his head. "All we have are the babblings of two miners who went insane and had to be put into straitjackets. But it doesn't seem to reproduce by budding. The miners babbled that it threw the buds at them, remember? They kept insisting that the buds made them feel like plants, fastening on their heads.

"Illusions like that are the stock-in-trade of unbalanced minds," she objected. "The miners probably cracked up from strain and merely imagined it."

"Still, I don't like it. They found something sticky and moist adhering to those poor devils' scalps, which had to be scraped off with a knife."

"I wouldn't worry about the buds, John. You've admitted that none of our men ever saw a blooming plant, if you want to think of the 'buds' as flowers. Even though we've kept our specimen stunted by allowing it no more nourishment than it could suck up on the Uranian Badlands, we've no assurance that it blooms when it finds richer soil. We know it increases prodigiously in size, yes. In regions where the Uranium soil is rich in carbon, you get huge, formidable growths.

"Our field men never saw a really huge plant, either, but the testimony of nervy frontier scouts can't be brushed aside. We can be fairly certain the plants grow by leaps and bounds and often explode, leaving deep craters in the landscape. But there is no agreement on the buds."

"But you've got to consider—"

"Please let me finish," she insisted. "No sensible man would walk right up and shake hands with a Diamond Plant. Most of the scouts stayed at a distance. The few miners who saw those big ones at close range were probably suffering from nerves. We've no positive proof that the plants bloom at all."

Carstairs seemed relieved. He crushed out his cigarette and stood up.

"All right, Vera, you've convinced me. I won't worry about sinister possibilities that may be just fantasms in a screwball's mind. But I'll have my hands full if that plant merely grows."

"*We'll* have our hands full," she said firmly. "If you think I'm not going with you, you're ticky in the coco."

"Now, Vera, look—"

"Are we taking the tube, or are we flying?" Vera asked. "If we go in an autogyro, we'll save time."

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FIFTEEN minutes later Carstairs was staring down at Third Level Manhattan, a Park Maintenance autogyro thrumming evenly under him. He was drenched with perspiration and his face looked as though a child's toy scooter had passed over it.

"You'd better start descending," Vera Dorn advised. "If you overshoot the gyro roof, you'll have to circle in a wide arc and we'll lose another ten minutes."

"Okay, I'm bringing her down," Carstairs snapped back.

He stuck a cigarette in his mouth and lit it before he reversed the glide stick. Silvery wings glinting in moonlight, the autogyro spiraled downward toward massive granite structures. It came to rest on the roof of the East River power turbine.

The roof was bathed in floodlights. Carstairs ground out his cigarette, clambered from the pilot's seat and emerged with a sprayer-capped ether can in his hand. Vera Dorn climbed out after him and stood blinking in the glare.

Across the roof a police officer came striding toward him, a flat-barreled automatic rifle cradled in his arm.

"Thank God you've come, Mr. Carstairs!" he exclaimed. "We thought we might have to blast—"

"Where's the inspector?" Carstairs cut him short.

"He's watching the sluices, sir. The plant has crawled up toward the lubricating drip. It's filling—"

"Never mind. Take me to McGuire."

Ten minutes later Carstairs was standing in flickering red radiance, staring into a tall, vertical chamber traversed by horizontal cross pipes.

The sluice chamber which supplied lubricant to the great East River power turbine was equipped with mechanical stirrers, which kept the flow of deflocculated graphite in constant motion. Beneath Carstairs swirled a lavalike lake of silica-treated carbon. Before him, in the depths of the chamber, loomed the funnel drip from which the lubricant came, its shining metal surface half-obscured by the writhing tentacles of the Diamond Plant.

Carstairs was standing between the inspector and Vera Dorn. He had stripped off his flying togs and strapped asbestos shields to his back and chest. His trousers were lined with heat-resistant gypsine, his feet protected by knee-high boots which had been supplied by the sluice superintendent.

Vera Dorn was similarly clad. She was going into the sluice chamber with him, carrying the ether tin. Amazingly she was almost exultant, although cold shudders were crawling down her back.

"It would be just a waste of energy to stop the funnel drip," McGuire was saying. "The super says it will take ten hours for the liquid carbon in there to drain off. It would take almost as long to get it out by buckets, even if we sent a dozen men in at one time."

Carstairs scarcely heard him. He was staring at the Diamond Plant, a look of stunned horror in his gaze.

The Diamond Plant had grown eight new tentacles and increased its height by several feet. Gray and bloated, it towered sturdily to the funnel drip and pulsed with greedy quiverings. It was sucking up nourishment by osmosis, drawing the liquid graphite into its loathsome bulk through the permeable membranes which lined its perambulating roots.

NEVER before had Carstairs realized how strikingly it resembled a monstrous blue-gray cuttlefish, resting on the lateral fins of its mantle sac and waving its horny, hooked tentacles in the air. But the horror in Carstairs' mind was not caused by its resemblance to a writhing squid. He had expected it to assume formidable proportions quickly and acquire a more demoniacal animation than it had hitherto shown. What he hadn't anticipated was the sudden appearance all over its grayish bulk of dangling, iridescent buds.

"John, the miners were right," Vera whispered. "But I don't think those buds are dangerous."

Carstairs shivered. "Dangerous or not, we've got to get that plant out of here before it grows any bigger. You're sure you know what to do?"

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"We're to move forward until we're standing directly under it," she said. "Then I'm to hand you the ether tin."

"Quickly," stressed Carstairs. "If a tentacle whips around you, I'll need both my hands."

"All right, I carry the ether. The instant you start spraying, I slap a handkerchief over my nose and back out of the chamber. You spray ether on the plant until it wilts, and then you follow. Don't forget *your* handkerchief, John."

"I won't," he promised. "Are you ready?"

She nodded.

"Good luck," the inspector said gruffly.

Into the sluice chamber stepped Carstairs and Vera Dorn. With liquid graphite swirling about their boots, they sloshed forward. Above them arched moisture-coated cross pipes, immersed in the glimmering pale radiance which poured down from the lamp-studded roof of the chamber.

"I wonder if it knows we're stalking it," Vera breathed.

"I don't think it does," Carstairs said.

They were within twenty feet of the plant when he reached out to take the ether tin from her hand. Instantly he stopped advancing. The girl's lips were white, but it wasn't her pallor which wrenched a gasp from Carstairs and sent cold chills coursing through him.

Clinging to Vera Dorn's brow and creeping over her rust-colored hair was a crinkling film of grayness. Even as Carstairs stared, the film widened, spread.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" she whispered.

Carstairs' mouth opened and closed, but no words came out. Something cold was clinging to his own brow and creeping across the nape of his neck.

Into the girl's face came a look of stark terror. Tremblingly she raised her hands and tugged at the film with her fingers. A nausea of dread wrenched Carstairs as he watched her. Tight-throated, he reached up and touched his forehead. Then with a shudder he flung his hand back to his neck. A wet, clabbery membrane covered his entire head. It clung tightly to his temples and descended in mucilaginous folds to the base of his skull.

Vera swayed dizzily and would have fallen, had not Carstairs swung about, grasped her sagging shoulders. Blind terror was upon him, a feeling of desperation. Vera was staring straight before her, as though unaware that he was shaking her.

"The buds," he muttered. "It must have thrown them at us!"

She didn't reply. Her head enmeshed in filmy grayness, her eyes wide, she was staring up vacuously at the plant, her neck twisted back.

IT seemed only a moment before Carstairs felt all the life leaving his hands. Vera's pale face receded and he seemed to be grasping emptiness, to be poised on the brink of a precipice that overhung a vast, glimmering void. Although he seemed to be standing on a solid surface, his body felt unnaturally buoyant. He was not even sure that he had a body. When he looked down, all he could see was a wavering grayness where his legs should have been. A fearful tension was growing within him, a sense of impending disaster.

The long, squidlike shape emerged obscurely from shivering haze. There was something about it which filled him with nightmare terror, but irresistibly he was drawn toward it through the grayness. Gradually the obscuring mist fell away. He saw that the shape was resting on a crater-pitted plain that stretched out endlessly in all directions.

The thing was unmistakably squidlike, but there was a suggestion of the human in its stare. There were waving tentacles up there. Two limpid eyes gazed down at him out of wrinkled flesh. As Carstairs stared in sick revulsion, a voice seemed to whisper in his brain:

"Thinking cap. On your head. I put it there."

Carstairs knew then. The cups were mind cups of the monstrous growth! His brain was throbbing with the plant's own despairing home-

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sickness, its black and hopeless dreams of a Uranian landscape.

Somehow Carstairs threw off the encompassing mist, saw for an instant the vault and the ether can gleaming in Vera Dorn's hand. Perhaps his own brain was stronger than the plant's in that one brief instant when realization dawned. Perhaps something deep within him, which had taken his little race from its homeland to all the planets, gained ascendancy momentarily.

The ether mist began arising, dispelling the grayness as he staggered backward with a handkerchief pressed to his nostrils and Vera Dorn at his side. Miraculously Vera was retreating, too, as though his own strength had driven the pall from her mind.

AT the swirl of ether vapor close to it, the great plant wilted and ceased utterly to dream. On Carstairs' head the gray membrane shriveled and fell away. Nothing but a thin, flocculent slime remained, such as a jellyfish leaves when it has been cast up on a beach at ebb tide.

Carstairs was almost out of the vault when he saw something that jolted the mists from his brain and chilled him to the core of his being. The wilted plant had toppled to one side, exposing a floundering human figure with matted hair and feverishly gleaming eyes. More like a corpse than a living man, he was gasping and choking in the lubricating drip and pressing both hands to his skull. His skin was livid and there was a bubbling froth on his mouth.

Carstairs swung about to make sure that Vera was still at his side, saw she was on the point of emerging. He turned and went sloshing back into the depths of the vault, the handkerchief still pressed to his mouth.

He came reeling out with a groaning man on his shoulders and a clammy dew on his brow. He had no recollection of stumbling, falling, no recollection of letting his burden topple from him and slipping into unconsciousness with a long, convulsive sigh.

When consciousness finally returned, he was lying on his side. Someone was chafing his wrists and murmuring close to his ear:

"Darling, are you all right now? We couldn't seem to rouse you."

Dazedly he sat up and stared about him. Vera Dorn was on her knees beside him. Standing at the entrance to the sluice chamber was Inspector McGuire.

"Hang it, lad," McGuire yelled, "you ought to be a policeman! The guy you pulled out of that muck is Joe Pagani, king of the jewel thieves. He must have followed the Diamond Plant in here when it threw tentacles around the guards and crawled into the sluice vault. He probably followed it all the way from East Thirty-fourth Street. Although I can't figure out why."

"I know why," Carstairs groaned. "The cup on his head made him want to stay close to it. He felt like a plant, too. His will was paralyzed and he couldn't help himself. Inspector, my head is splitting. That plant—"

"The cup on his head? What in blazes are you talking about?"

"It buds, Inspector. It buds when it feeds on carbon. They must have fed it pure carbon. That's what comes of believing what you read in the papers. This Pagani must have been a brainy guy. He read a distorted account of your mere specimen's dietary requirements and fed it carbon. After it killed his cronies, it must have budded, put a thinking cap on his head, then headed for the turbine. Inspector, I've got to get it out! It isn't dead. It's just anesthetized."

McGuire's face was taut and set.

"Just take it easy, lad," he cautioned. "We'll do all the lifting. What a mess! It looks like a big, punctured bladder."

On Vera Dorn's face was the light of a great joy.

"Not everyone can travel in ten minutes across two billion miles of space," she said.

"You mean you saw it, too?" Carstairs gasped. "You knew it was dreaming about Uranus?"

Vera slowly nodded. "I could guess, John. Deep within my mind, I—I heard it speak."

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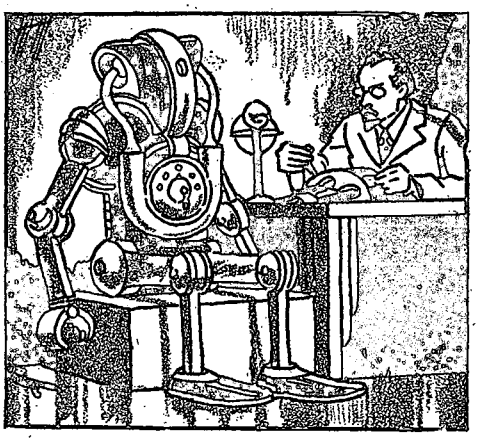
"It's all clear to me now," the curator said. "Diamond Plants grow minds when they get plenty of nourishment, precisely as we grow fingernails. We're born with brains, but they bud out mentally only when their vitality is running high. There is probably some form of life on Uranus we haven't discovered yet, some haunter of the carbon beds which preys on them. To keep it from attacking them, they throw their mind cups at it, undermining its will and giving it hypnotic dreams. Some manlike plant, probably, with a highly evolved mind. Different planets, different life-forms."

Vera Dorn was in his arms now, shivering.

"Darling, if ever I hear anyone say 'put on your thinking cap,' I'll—I'll—"

Carstairs lowered his head and silenced her with a kiss.

"From now on," he said, "we'll do all our thinking right here on Earth."



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MOON PATROL

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

Author of "Danger's Bloody Banner," "Slave of Alhambra," etc.

Everyone on the Moon seemed saturated with hilarity

Officer Connolly's Toothache Becomes a Pain in the Neck to Space Crooks When They Try to Laugh a Lunar Factory Out of Its Payroll!

ZIPPING up the front of his space-suit, but leaving the lucite flaps of his helmet open, Dan Connolly walked past the two Moon patrol ships outside Headquarters and entered the Police administration Building. Old Sergeant Rourke was talking to a youngish man, who was also dressed for space-travel.

"Evening, Dan," Rourke said. "All ready to start? This gent's Mr. Paxton, of the Nitrogenation Plant, taking the Moon trip to see that she's okay. He'll be riding with you."

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Dan nodded surlily. He didn't like passengers on the Moon patrol. It was a twenty-four-hour journey and the Police ships didn't provide sleeping accommodation. They were just jaloppies, thirty years old, depending on rocket exposives for propulsion. A parsimonious Government had refused an appropriation for modern craft with atomic engines. Any pert young miss, in a modern ship with an atomic-powered motor, could show the police jaloppies a real burst of speed.

Rourke got up and came over to Dan in the locker room.

"There's a safe full of money in the plant's offices to pay the men," he said, "and it's two months since Pogen broke jail. That tip we got from China may have been a false trail. All our men are away on it and we haven't been able to get signals through the Heavyside since the Sun began acting up last week. Pogen's desperate enough to be capable of trying a hold-up. You'll get the report from the Moon station. Now what's troubling you, Dan? Is Malva all right?"

"Sure she's all right," growled Dan. "As right as a Moon patrol cop's wife has a right to be. It's a dog's life for a woman, though, ain't it? Maybe if I jolt up Paxton a bit, he'll use his influence to have these j a l o p p i e s junked."

"Now look, Dan, I know you're sore. We're all sore about it, but—"

"Sore's certainly the word, Sarge. Ain't we Moon patrol cops the laughing-stock of every souse with a two-cylinder atomic engine who's breaking the rules of the spacelane? Is there anything we can catch with these rocket-busters of ours, except a one-cylinder atomic bike—maybe?"

"Dan, you've got no sense of humor," said Sergeant Rourke. "And you've certainly got a grand grouch on, you sorehead. What's the matter with your face?"

"That? Nothing. Impacted tooth that's got to come out. Doc Smag told me so on my last patrol."

"Why wait to get to the Moon to consult Doc Smag when there's a perfectly good Earth dentist across the street? I wouldn't trust a Moon dentist with Mars blood in him. Mars blood's bad. Look at Pogen."

"Say, listen," objected Dan, "Smag's only quarter-Mars and just because he was born on the Moon doesn't make him a bad dentist. Why, he was educated at Yonkers Dental College! Besides, I'm not going to blast off with a gap in my jaw."

"Well, it's your own funeral, Dan," Rourke sighed. "I'll be starting for the Moon tomorrow to check up. Maybe we'll pass each other. If Pogen does try anything, I guess the force on the Moon can handle him, but I don't like the set-up. So long, Dan, and don't forget to take care of that tooth."

THE Moon patrol ships were certainly the stock joke in space-travel. They were egg-shaped, for the first rocket ships had been built under the influence of the old streamlining idea. Men could not free their minds of the idea that a cylinder would travel better through space than a square or a sphere. In the stern, the large end of the egg, was a hold capable of holding two or three prisoners, generally drunks—when the jaloppy was able to catch them.

However, there was one good thing about the Police ships. They were practically foolproof. Once through the Heavyside jogging along at their maximum speed of ten thousand, they rarely broke down.

Before the Nitrogenation Plant was installed on the Moon, there was hardly anything worth stealing there. Now and again a drunk from one of the overnight houses had to be picked up, or taken in magnetic tow along the route. Now, with thousands of laborers on the Moon, there was need of a good fleet of fast, modern space ships.

Dan glanced at Mr. Paxton, hunched up in the seat beside him. He didn't like Paxton. Besides, that tooth of his was sending darts of fire all along his jaw. His face, the one side of it seen in the mirror over the space-shield, was losing all resemblance to nature's creation.

Dan thumbed the rocket mechanism and heard the faint sound of exploding gases in the swiftly thinning air.

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The ship shot upward. The Earth radio beam went dead. They were through the Heavyside.

Now, quite faintly, Dan could hear the radio beam at Nitro, on the Moon. He was all right now. He could take it easy. He set his pointer to the beam and settled himself in his seat.

"Tooth bothering you?" asked Mr. Paxton.

"Some," grunted Dan.

"You should have stayed home. Try a little of my pain-killer."

He reached toward his bag.

"Never touch anything on a trip," said Dan grumpily. "Government rule's strict."

"But you'll have to wait for treatment till you get back to Earth."

"Not when there's a first-class dentist on the Moon. Name's Smag. Know him?"

"No. This is my first trip to the Moon, but I'm glad for your sake that there's a dentist there. He ought to do a good business, with all this crowd flocking in. Smag's a Martian name, isn't it?"

"Well, he's quarter-Mars," admitted Dan, "but he's a fine fellow. His mother was Earth, his father half-Mars. They moved to the Moon before he was born, under the Government settlers' scheme. They were killed in that accident to the oxygenation system, but Smag was rescued. Educated at Yonkers Dental College. Went back to the Moon to practice among the miners.

"Kind of a dogged, solemn fellow, Smag is. I never knew him to smile. I guess that's where his Martian blood tells. Yes, Smag takes life kind of hard, but he's a real dentist, Mr. Paxton. Nobody can say he isn't."

DAN was beginning to feel a little more friendly toward Mr. Paxton, and the conversation about Smag had strangely alleviated the ache in his jaw.

"Just what is this Nitrogenation Plant?" he asked.

"Why, to extract nitrogen from the atmosphere for fertilizer," said Paxton. "We used to extract it on Earth, you know, but it was always a difficult job to get enough. And then, when the demand became enormous, these Earth First ladies started an agitation about extracting so much nitrogen. They claimed that the percentage in the atmosphere had dropped from seventy-eight to seventy-five.

"Well, that was a laugh, but you see, with so much inert nitrogen lying around on the Moon, it was cheaper to extract it and ship it to Earth. Now we take it from the rocks by means of a catalyst with a basic oxide, form nitric oxide by combination with the oxygen that we produce on the Moon, and the rest's simple. Maybe it's a little out of your line, though, eh?"

"I'm only a cop," agreed Dan. "Well, I hope the opening goes off all right."

"I do, too. They ought to be celebrating now. I wish I had been able to get to it, but I guess my time's no freer than yours."

Dan wanted to have turned the conversation back to Smag again, because it helped his jaw wonderfully, but Mr. Paxton had settled himself in his seat for a nap.

As the hours went by, the pain in Dan's jaw became murderous. Seen in the mirror, one side of his face had become perfectly spherical.

Mr. Paxton woke up from his nap and began munching sandwiches. He offered one to Dan, who shook his head and scowled painfully. If Dan had known it was going to be as bad as that, he'd have taken Sergeant Rourke's advice and seen the dentist across the street.

Earth was sloping away, an immense ball beneath him. The bright side, which was China, reflected the sunlight. There would be continuous light, now that the Moon was ahead, an enormous silvery bulk. The metrometer showed Dan that he was nearly halfway there.

In his teleidoscopic mirror, Dan saw a space ship coming from Earth behind him. It shot past at about thirty-five thousand, just a faint track across the mirror's surface, visible only by reason of the retention image of the retina, which converted it into a single streak. Dan hadn't even a retardation lens to hold it. But his detecto-beam caught sounds coming

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from the interior, deepening into bass and dying away into silence:

Stay, Moon, gray Moon,
Don't you go away, Moon,
We're a-coming, things are humming,
Just a crowd of folks a-bumming—

"Drunks!" snorted Dan, easing the earphone on his swollen cheek. "I'll run that crowd in when I get to Nitro. Oh, well, what's the use?"

That was just the point. A trip with a couple of drunks in the hold of the jaloppy wasn't a happy prospect. If he took them in magnetic tow, assuming that he could get near enough, they'd break the tow with a flick of their anti-gravitation switch and be five thousand miles away, laughing at him and broadcasting insulting remarks about his ship.

MR. PAXTON, of course, had seen and heard nothing.

"It's a very interesting trip, Mr. Connolly," he observed. "I've often wanted to make it, but somehow the chance never came my way. Don't you get a sense of loneliness, though, out in these vast, untraveled fields of space?"

"What's that?" Dan snarled out of the movable side of his mouth. "Untraveled? Lonely? You didn't see that crowd of drunks that just went whizzing past us, did you? Why, the whole route's rotten with them, Sundays and holidays. No, I'm not lonely. Sometimes I wish I were."

More hours passed. Dan was sloping down toward Nitro now, half an Earth hour behind time. The Moon was a great, glittering ball that filled the whole arc of sky in front of him.

"We're coming in now," he said. "You'd better get ready."

He could see Nitro, with its twin nitrogenation and oxygenation plants and the buildings clustered about them. He could even see the green of the park, with its trees, trying to flourish in the synthetic atmosphere.

The needle of the sound-indicator began to tremble. That meant they had already entered the atmosphere, which was dissipated into the void almost as quickly as the oxygenation plant was able to manufacture it. At that distance, thin and attentuated almost to the zero point, it nevertheless registered on the sensitive dial. It was carrying the sounds from within the hull, the static of space.

Slowly the acoustometer needle began to move. At quarter-atmosphere Dan shifted from space gear to air gear. The stout little jaloppy quivered under the shock, then slowed. A sheaf of sparks enveloped her, vanished as Dan dropped from five hundred to a hundred and fifty. In his teleidoscope Dan could see everything plainly on Nitro, even Doc Smag's office at the corner, nearly opposite the police station.

A dozen space ships were berthed at magnetic anchorage, among them a neat, rakish-looking craft that drew Dan's attention. There was no reason why he should be so interested in her as she rode at anchor a dozen miles above Nitro. It was just the instinct of the policeman that there was something wrong about her or her owners. Well, that could wait. His tooth came first.

He eased into magnetic anchorage and waited for the current to warp him up to the dock. He snapped off his headpiece and unzipped the helmet of his space-suit. Then he leaped ashore.

Doc Smag's office was on the ground floor of one of the new buildings that had sprung up about the plant. As Dan drew near, he saw Smag standing at the vitrophane window, looking out at him. Smag, clad in his white jacket, was somberly looking out upon life. Smag, with that one-quarter Martian blood that made him so deadly serious all the time.

Seeing the dead-panned dentist sometimes made Dan wonder whether one of his own ancestors had ever had Martian blood. Dan and Smag were two of a kind. Sober individuals, they failed to see anything amusing about the silly, meaningless things that made Earthmen chortle with glee.

DAN entered the building, climbed a flight of stairs. He flung a dor open and walked in.

"Hello, Doc," he mumbled. "Reach for the forceps. That impacted tooth

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is giving me the devil."

Smag rubbed his hairless face with his skinny Martian fingers.

"Get into that chair. Well fix you quick."

Dan sat down, but the pain in his jaw had disappeared magically. He was half-inclined to call off the session, only he knew it would be back the moment he left that office.

"Say, Doc," he temporized, "you sure she ought to come out?"

"Why not, policeman? Everything ready. For a steady customer like you, cost not much."

"What kind of anesthetic are you going to give me this time, you cheap-skate?" Dan demanded. "The last time you gave me a shot of that newfangled pain-o-serum. It didn't work so hot. You gave it to me because it was so cheap, you skinflint."

"Nitrous oxide this time," Smag said. "Make you laugh."

"Why, you Martian moocher!" Dan roared. "The only reason you're giving me nitrous oxide is you get the nitrogen cheaply from the plant here on the Moon. Okay, you quack. Go ahead and yank."

Doc Smag fitted the nozzle of a rubber hose against Dan's mouth. In a moment the policeman was inhaling deeply of the hissing anesthetic. He began to feel slightly giddy, but other than that the gas had little effect on him.

He felt the forceps fit themselves at a section of his inflamed gum. For a moment the top of his head seemed to be coming off. Then Doc Smag was standing with the tooth in his hand, roaring with laughter.

"R-r-rinse her out," Smag howled. "Haw—haw!"

"Haw — haw, yourself," Dan snapped. "What's so funny? Anyone would think you had taken the stuff yourself, instead of giving it to me."

"Haw—haw—haw—haw!" Smag let himself go, doubled up with laughter and pointed a skinny Martian finger at Dan's face. "You look so funny. Haw—haw—haw!"

Dan felt as if his best friend had betrayed him. Smag had seemed his only refuge in this world of silly Earthmen. He stepped toward an alcove, in which was a wash-basin with a little mirror on the wall above it. He looked at his reflection. Well, maybe Smag was right, although it was queer for the Martian dentist to see the humor of his appearance.

Dan's right cheek was still swollen, but now it looked as if a grapefruit had been shoved into his mouth. It was a preposterous caricature that scowled back at Dan, with the mouth twisted up into a thin, curving snarl.

"How do you feel now—haw—haw!" inquired the dentist.

"Still hurts," Dan said. "I guess that nitrous oxide didn't help much."

"Here." Smag reached for a little packet on the table. "If pain gets bad again, take a pill. But easy with them —this is the last of my supply. Haw —haw!"

"Thanks, Doc," Dan said, tucking the packet inside his belt. "How much do I owe you? Can you change a token?"

"Never mind. Pay me next time you come. I'm having too good a time to think of money."

THE patrolman weaved out of the dentist's office, still puzzled by the Martian's strange behavior. The doc's laughing paroxysm could somehow be explained, but Dan had never believed he would live to see the day when old Smag would turn down a fee.

His jaw began to throb fiercely, again, bringing him out of his reveries. Well, the tooth was out, at any rate. If his jaw began to hurt him much more, he'd swallow one of those pills Smag had given him.

Dan was headed back for his jaloppy when he saw three policemen come running out of the station house and head toward the Nitrogenation Plant. Dan outstripped them, pulled his electro spray-gun out of its holster as he ran.

A crowd was milling about the plant. Their cries rose in a loud roar of laughter, as though something funny were going on. Dan broke through them. At the end of the short street leading to the plant entrance he saw three men, one of whom, by the stocky Martian figure, he recognized as Po-

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gen. All three men were wearing portable oxygen masks.

Each of them had an electro-gun, which he was pointing at the gleeful mob. At their feet lay a bag. It was not a big bag, but big enough to hold a fortune in labor tokens. Dropping down from above was the little egg-shaped tender of a space ship, its vanes whirling as it made the slow vertical descent. Strewn about the short street lay a dozen blackened and twisted bodies, victims of the holdup.

Dan forgot all about his aching jaw as he leaped forward. He had some twenty paces to cover and he was quite alone in the street, save for the three panting cops behind him. But one of the three men had stooped to grasp the bag and a second was wrenching open the door of the tender. The third yelled and sent a spray of death in Dan's direction.

Dan leaped to one side and the stream of vivid light shot past him. He heard one of the policemen behind him scream and stumble, but Dan plunged on.

Just as the thug was about to fire again, the one who had opened the tender door leaped back, jostling him. The second stream blasted the front of a building, ripping an awning into shreds. The third man dropped the bag and whirled. Dan's blast caught him squarely. The whole visible outline of him disintegrated into crumbling cinders.

"Drop 'em!" Dan shouted.

Pogen cursed. Dan heard the muffled tones through the criminal's oxygen mask. Just then a trio of plant workers thrust themselves between Dan and the two surviving criminals.

"Haw-haw!" laughed one of the workers. "Ain't the world grand?"

"You said it, pal," chortled his companions.

Dan swore softly. The three laughing plant laborers had cut him off from the criminals. If he chanced a shot at them now, he might hit one of the innocent workers.

Dan whirled around, searching for help. With the aid of another Patrol man, he would be able to nail his men, but he encountered only a sea of laughing, grinning faces. Everyone on the Moon seemed saturated with hilarity. It was as though everyone except the criminals had become affected by some strange laughing gas.

Dan snapped his fingers. That was it! The criminals who had planned this robbery had wrecked the Nitrogenation Plant with an atomic bomb. It had played havoc with the oxygenation system, drawing the nitrogen out of the atmosphere so fast that it changed the mixture.

DAN glanced at the charred bodies of the murdered men, shuddered. The criminals' plan had been fiendishly cunning. Air was roughly three parts of nitrogen to one of oxygen. The atomic blast had changed the Moon's artificial atmosphere to two parts of nitrogen to one of oxygen. The result was nitrous oxide—laughing gas!

That explained why the crooks ware oxygen masks, why everyone was laughing—and why old Smag, usually sober and serious, had felt so funny. It was a new strategy in criminal warfare, killing people with laughter.

Dan didn't have time to wonder why he himself wasn't affected by the nitrous oxide that permeated the Moon's scant atmosphere. Maybe it was because he literally didn't have a sense of humor.

He sprang into action once again, just as the trio of laborers got out of the way. Simultaneously the criminals headed for their ship. It was the one Dan had noticed before, anchored nineteen kilos above the wharf. He had thought it looked hot.

Dan leaped at the criminal nearest him in a flying tackle that was possible only on the Moon. The criminal fell to the ground with a *plop*. Then Dan met with a surprise. The outlaw twisted sharply, shook off Dan's hold. Leaping nimbly to his feet, he clipped the space officer sharply on the already painful jaw. Then he kicked Dan's gun out of reach and ripped the ammunition belt off him.

"We may need this," the thug explained to his companion as he raced away from the scene. "Ammunition's low."

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Dan sprang for his gun, retrieved it. He sent a shot after the escaping criminals, missed. He fired again, but the weapon merely clicked. Furious because they had stolen his ammunition belt, Dan threw the useless weapon away. The criminals were already in the ship and had blasted off.

The mob of people watching Dan broke into spasms of new laughter. Tears began rolling down their cheeks. Dan fumed and sputtered to himself. They thought the whole incident funny. As if that weren't enough to contend with, his jaw began to ache again.

Somebody hailed Dan from behind. He turned and saw Mr. Paxton coming toward him, weaving unsteadily. Dan frowned, rubbed his aching jaw. Right now that was his main worry.

"Hey, Connolly—ha-ha-ha—do you suppose you could take me back to Earth?" cackled Paxton. "Don't make me laugh— Excuse me, Connolly, but don't look at me like that. I can't stand it!"

Mr. Paxton went into a new fit of exuberant laughter.

"Funny about those two robbers," he laughed on. "The cops will never catch 'em, ha-ha! I heard 'em say they're going to Asteroid Four-eighty-six-B and make the place their hideout."

"Four-eighty-six-B?" Dan echoed, his eyes flaming. "Come on, brother. We'll get those guys. Hop in my tub!"

Mr. Paxton doubled up in mirth.

"Shay, you'll never catch 'em in your jaloppy! Their ship is atom-powered!"

Mr. Paxton began laughing harder than ever. If the situation hadn't been so devilishly serious, Dan might have joined in. This laughing jag was contagious. The thought of his ancient jaloppy overhauling the modern, fleet craft the criminals had made their escape in was ludicrous, but Dan had to get them, and he had a plan in mind that might work.

A little unsteady himself, Dan led Mr. Paxton into his little ship. The steady diet of nitrous oxide was beginning to poison even the lawman himself, despite his strong natural immunity.

"Come along, Mr. Paxshton," he mumbled. "Hold onto me. You're ash drunk ash a coot from the fumesh of this shtuff, but you and me are going plashes."

CONNOLLY realized that he was drunk, although his brain was clear. It was shameful for a Moon patrol cop to be intoxicated, but of course it would wear off pretty soon. Nevertheless the inside of the jaloppy was swimming and the instrument board was a blur.

Dan demagnetized the anchor, jammed the rocket apparatus and heard the furious discharge that lifted the craft into the air. Spluttering, she shot upward with increasing acceleration as her engines got into action.

The Sun was obscured by the enormous Earth overhead, a huge, black ball in the sky. The stars were hard points in that temporary twilight. The acoustometer needle sank toward the zero point, for they were outside the thin fringe of the Moon's synthetic atmosphere.

Mr. Paxton had been dozing at Dan's side. Now he opened on eye and chortled.

"Don't look at me like that—I'm trying to hold it in!" he choked. "Oh, lordy, I thought we'd be free of those fumes in here, but they're just as bad as ever. Don't you feel all ticklish inside, Connolly?"

Dan tried to answer, but he lurched toward Mr. Paxton and they clung to one another. Tears were streaming from their eyes, while they laughed until the pain of wrenched ribs stopped them.

"How about the plant?" Dan managed to ask.

"Mechanism dishranged," sobbed Mr. Paxton. "Too hard for me to handle. Going back for chemisht—exshpert advice."

So Dan's hunch had been right. The outlaws had disrupted the plant's mechanism. He flipped on the radio transmitter, waited for a buzzing beam.

"Dan Connolly calling Sergeant Rourke," he barked. "I'm going after Pogen and his partner. They shot a

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dozen men, grabbed the payroll. They're heading for Asteroid Four-eighty-six-B. I'll get them."

There was a faint signal in Dan's right earphone. He adjusted a dial.

"Sergeant Rourke calling," he heard. "I'm on your node, Dan. Are you crazy, chasing Pogen in your ship? You'll never get him."

"I said Four-eighty-six-B," Dan answered. "RA-six-X, Sergeant," he went on in the interplanetary police code. "Get it, Rourke?"

There was a moment's silence while Sergeant Rourke referred to the code book.

"Smart work, Dan," he applauded. "Get 'em! Meet you on the Moon in ten sol."

Paxton turned toward Dan, the effects of the nitrous oxide worn off completely by now.

"How are you going to get them, Connolly? By the time you get halfway to their hideout, your ship will be out of fuel."

Dan wanted to smile, but his aching jaw prevented the impulse.

"They'll never get there," he promised. "You see, to reach Four-eighty-six-B, those birds have to pass Mason's Asteroid. That's the only safe route. Too many meteors any other way. And Mason's Asteroid—well, she'll do the trick for us. Just hold onto your seat and watch."

Connolly gunned the rockets, heading the ship for the designated asteroid.

THE little sphere loomed up ahead at last. Dan cut his jets, slowed the ship.

"Look ahead, Mr. Paxton, on the asteroid's surface," he said. "It's just as I thought."

"Why, it's Pogen's ship!" the inspector explained. "They're stuck there!"

"Sure. Why shouldn't they be stuck? Mason's Asteroid has a super-electro-magnetic core. It generates a force that's so strong, it blows out sensitive atomic motors. Pilots passing Mason's Asteroid are instructed to cut their motors and coast past. Pogen didn't know that. When he passed, the powerful forces blew out his motors. He must have circled and made a quick landing here, using the weak rocket auxiliaries. My guess is they're going to see what they can do about repairing the motors."

Paxton nodded puzzledly. "But why isn't your jaloppy affected?"

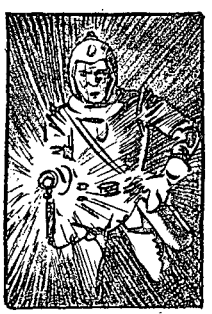
"Because my ship is powered by rocket explosives. There's nothing atom-fueled about my crate. This is the one time an old jaloppy has it over the fast boats."

"What now?" asked Paxton.

"Oh, it'll be a cinch to take 'em back to the Moon in magnetic tow. The blowout affected their anti-gravitation switch and they'll be helpless to cut us off. As far as I'm concerned, they're as good as in the clink right now. Let me get at my space-suit. I'm going out there to get something from those birds."

"The payroll loot?"

"Payroll loot, nothing!" Dan roared. "Those guys stole my ammunition belt, with a pack of pain-killing pills old Doc Smag gave me. It was his last pack. That's what I came after—and that's what I'm going to get!"



COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

CHRISTMAS ON MARS

A Yuletide Scientifiction Story

By WILLIAM MORRISON

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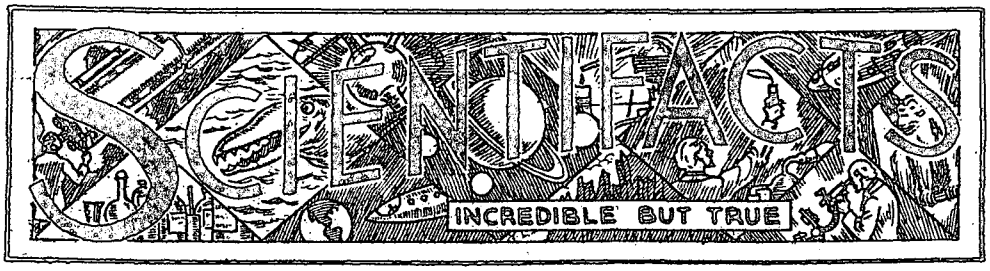


INSECT THERMOMETERS

SCIENTISTS can obtain an almost perfect record of the temperature of the air by timing the chirping of crickets or the speed of ants!

By counting the number of chirps a cricket makes in 14 seconds, and adding 40 to that number, one gets the correct temperature. Science says it's as simple as that. And tests show that it is possible to get the correct temperature within 1 degree 75 percent of the time, and within 2 degrees 90 percent of the time.

As for the ant, Dr. Shapley of Harvard College has found that this insect reports the temperature in much the same way that crickets do. Instead of slowing up as people do when the weather gets warmer, the ants just work harder than ever. So by timing them at their work it is possible to obtain the temperature of the air.

So when you get worried about heat prostration this summer, just let a cricket decide for you. If he tells you it's too hot, take his word for it and go sit in the shade!

FASTER THAN A BULLET

AT wide-open throttle some modern planes can fly faster than a heavy revolver bullet!

At high-flying speeds — in the vicinity of 500 miles an hour—gunnery becomes something quite different from what aviators are accustomed to. A gun fired broadside at another plane on a parallel course must be pointed considerably ahead of the target because wind resistance will give the bullets a curved path.

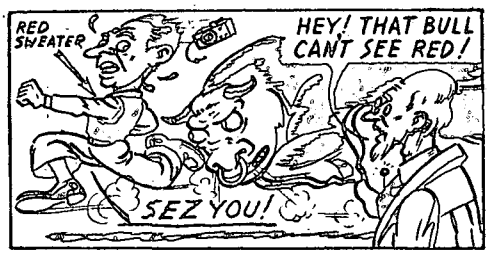
A pilot speeding at five hundred miles an hour could even fly into bullets that he fires from his own gun if he points the gun up at a slight angle to give the bullets a trajectory that will bring them down into his flight path at the same time that his plane reaches that point!

Some stunt—if you want to play it on your propeller!

THE KING OF COLOR

MAN alone, of all mammals, has color vision!

Human eyes are the best in the world. And, by a strange quirk of nature, we alone, of the entire animal kingdom, have color vision. Strange to report, a bull is color-blind. It is the noise and excitement of the bull ring, not the crimson rag, that provokes his temper.



The dog, the cat, the horse all are color-blind. But the reptiles, birds, and insects can see color. Why nature should have made all the other mammals color-blind, then changed her policy when she came to man, is an enigma unsolved by science.

MICROCHEMISTRY'S MIRACLES

SCIENCE can weigh the amount of matter necessary to dot your i!

It has long been known that microchemists have the delicate apparatus with which to weigh the ordinary sig-

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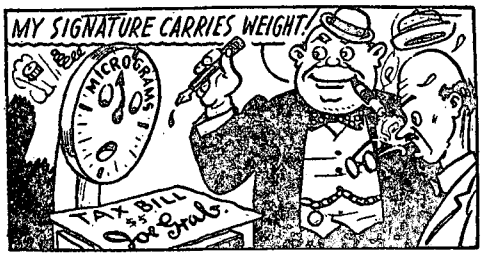
nature on a chemical balance.

Recently an experiment was made on a more sensitive instrument. Instead of the full name only a period was made on the sheet of paper with a sharply pointed pencil. The period



weighed ten micrograms (one microgram weighing approximately a hundredth as much as a grain of salt).

Each time you dot your i's, your pencil becomes several micrograms lighter. Each time a raindrop falls, some fifty to one hundred thousand micrograms strike. One cent will buy 10,000 micrograms of gold!

And if you owned a five-dollar gold piece, you'd be a microgram millionaire!

GOING UP?

EVEN though its rockets were fired at a speed of a mile a second, a space ship would have to be at least as massive as Mt. Everest to reach the Moon and return!

In order for a rocket-propelled ship to move through space, it is necessary for the rockets to fire expanding gases, or some kind of matter, away from the ship. The recoil sends the ship ahead.

But here's the rub, as pointed out by Dr. J. W. Campbell, of the University of Alberta, Canada, after mathematical studies:

The space ship can only take along a limited amount of matter. And, if the ship had to take along enough fuel to get it to the Moon and back, for every pound of the ship returning a million tons would have to start out!

If the returning ship has a mass of 500 tons, and the matter originally carried was about as dense as that of ordinary rocks, enough would be needed at the takeoff to make a ball five miles in diameter!

CUTTING DR. KILDARE

THE ancient law-makers believed in a hand for an eye!

Doctors were a recognized part of the ancient civilizations of the Near East. By 2,000 B.C. surgical practices were covered by law. A section of the Code of Hammurabi, King of Babylon, states:

"If a physician make a deep incision upon a man with his bronze lancet and save the man's life; or if he operate on the eye socket of a man and save that man's eye, he shall receive ten shekels of silver."

However, the law continues, if the operation were unsuccessful and the patient should die or lose his eye, the physician's hand would be cut off!

So if the Dr. Kildare of yore didn't know his scalpelry, it was hands off!

WHALE-HUNTING, 1941

WHALERS of today fight the giant of the sea via electricity! Electrocuting whales has been found an effective and humane way of killing them. Aboard the whaling boat, a powerful electric generator produces the necessary current. One side of the generator is "grounded" to the sea. Electricity from the other side is led, through a cable bearing a metallic strand, to the harpoon.

When the quarry is within range of the harpoon gun, the missile is fired. A square hit instantly completes the circuit through the whale's body and the sea, dispatching the animal before it can plunge into the depths.

THIS INCREDIBLE WORLD

WATER cannot percolate deeper into the Earth than six miles, because of the tremendous pressure and packing at great depths . . . A tank moves over seven times as far per dollar as a cavalry unit and can hurl

from five to ten times as many pounds of bullets at the enemy per man employed . . . Coin-vending machines were first used in early Egyptian temples; they dispensed ceremonial water

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when the correct weight of coins was placed in a slot. . . .

The male box turtle has red eyes, the female yellow ones! . . . In every exhaled breath of a human being there are approximately 200,000,000 particles nearly 100 times the diameter of air-molecules . . . An average well nourished adult man can live some fifty to eighty days without food, only six to eight days without water, and less than ten minutes without air!

THE PERILS OF SPEED

DIVERS get the "bends" from going up too fast. And so can an aviator!

An aviator rapidly ascending from sea level to an altitude of about 33,000 feet is in exactly the same danger of "the bends" as a diver coming up from 100 feet below the surface in the same period of time.

In other words, the atmospheric pressure at 33,000 feet is just one-quarter of that at sea level and the aviator ascending to that height and the diver coming up from submergence are both being decompressed in the ratio of four to one.

It is the liberation of bubbles of nitrogen from the blood when the atmospheric pressure is suddenly reduced that causes the bends. Inhalation of oxygen is no remedy for this situation. The only effective treatment is rapid recompression by coming down to a lower altitude.

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Next Issue

DAMES IS POISON

The Return of Pete Manx

By KELVIN KENT

SNAPDRAGON

A Story of the Botanical Detective

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG

AND MANY OTHERS

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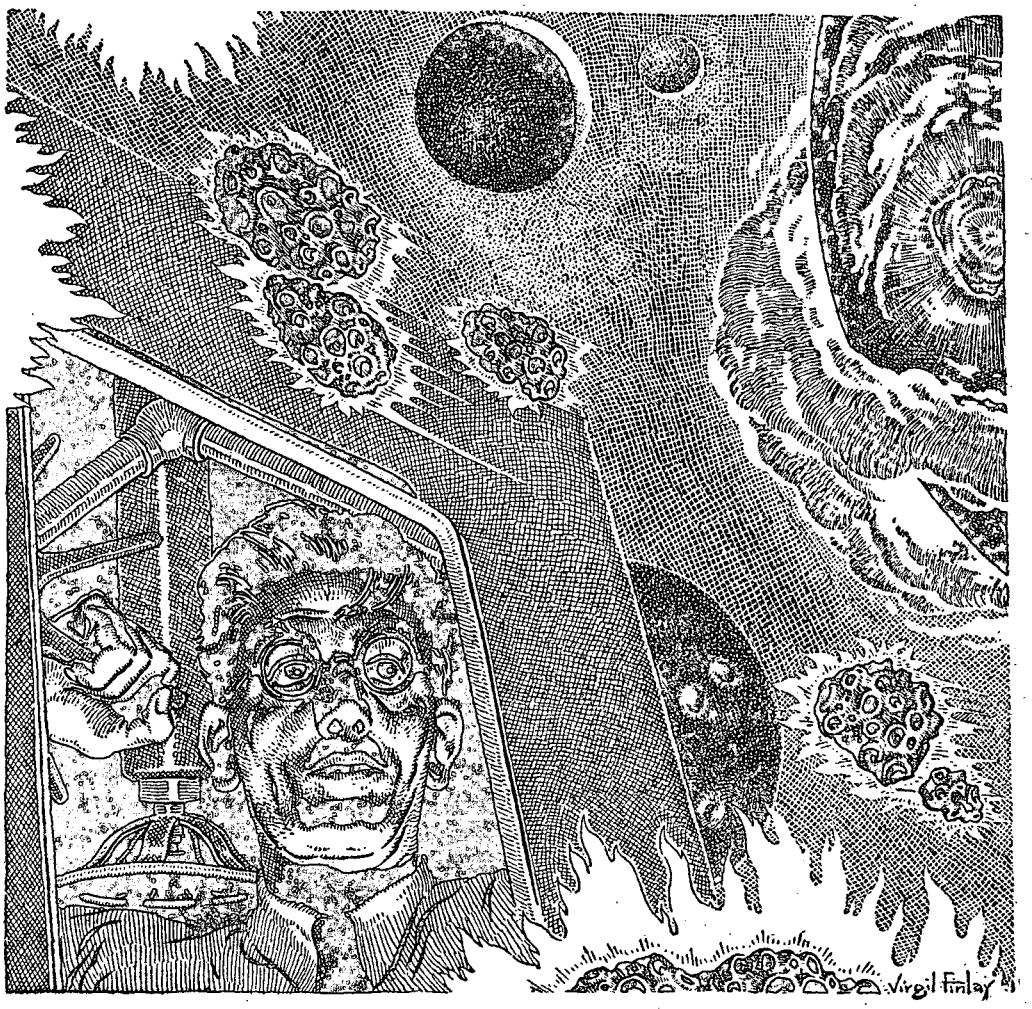
Physicist Emanuel Weck Makes a Date for the Death of the Universe—and Finds Himself with Decillions of Years to Kill!



Emanuel began throwing the lever that slowed down time

THE VOICE

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

Author of "Exiles of the Planetoid," "The Mathematical Kid," etc.

EMANUEL MARCUS WECK lived for just one thing, and he disregarded the possibility of failure. He visioned himself as a conqueror of time.

That was his one ambition. Because of it, he threw into the discard such things as love, glory and the joys of human relationship. If he could traverse time, he felt that the human race could not possibly offer him a tithe of the applause and respect he deserved.

He was a man with a fantastic imagination. His mind dwelt in the billions upon billions of years ahead, when the heat-death would descend on the Universe. He wanted to wit-

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ness that death. He wanted to see planets cool and die, their very atoms radiate into energy.

He wanted to be there when no matter at all existed.

Under the impulse of this flaming desire, he overthrew all obstacles that might have stood in his way. He graduated with a long list of science degrees from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a scrawny undernourished, young-old man with burning coal-black eyes and an irascible temper. He acquired a high-paying sinecure which would provide for the financial ends of his project.

He went about the matter of acquiring a wife with mechanical, yet high-gear tactics. He wanted a certain type. He found her, deliberately fell in love with her, and then, since he was placing a time limit on his marriage, he proposed.

"Mirabelle, I want you. You are going to be mine."

That thrilled Mirabelle. He wanted her! And so they were married.

Eight years passed. Emanuel worked ceaselessly. He invented something for doing away with noisy valves and lived on immense royalties. He built a large house off in the wilds and dragged his gregarious wife with him. There she sat, while he worked toward the solution of the greatest problem ever flaunted in the face of man.

And the dream assumed the outlines of reality. One more assault, one more day!

The day was bright and sunny when he awoke. He smiled, his eyes bright. He dressed quickly and came down to breakfast. Mirabelle had just poured the coffee. Mirabelle, sad-eyed, wondering if there were such a thing as love between her and the man who sat across from her, preoccupied with everything but her.

She toyed with her food, watching him with veiled eyes. Love? He loved his machines more. He ate with an intensity that denoted his terrific excitement. When he scraped back his chair, crossed to her and kissed her, it was with no slightest sign of the passionate ardor which had won her.

"You can call me at twelve, darling," he said.

And so he went below to his laboratory, down to his machines and his great creation. She knew he had forgotten her the moment he was out of sight.

TWELVE o'clock arrived. She called. He did not answer. Having never been in his private sanctuary, she did not descend. She called again and again, and still received no answer. She grew frightened. Perhaps he had met with an accident, was lying down there, blood seeping from a wound!

She finally braved the dangers of his subterranean retreat and ran down the steep stone stairs, panting in nervous excitement. At the foot of the stairs she took a hasty look around the laboratory.

Not a flicker of life disturbed its serenity. It was in a scrupulously neat condition, save for the necessary untidiness of row upon row of boxed chemicals, of greasy waste. There were dynamos, transformers, huge weird masses of other machinery. Several eight hundred watt lamps glared blindingly.

Her attention focused on a gigantic, perfect cube near the south wall, almost touching the ceiling fifteen feet above. She stared. It possessed one almost undiscernible door and a window similar to a porthole. A wavy, shimmering translucence imparted a ghostly aura to it.

She forced herself across the room, put her face to the window. She took a step backward, gasped:

"Emanuel!"

He was looking out at her, staring through his tortoise-shell glasses. His brows were lowered, his lips compressed.

She called his name again. Not a muscle flexed, not an eye blinked. She felt faint, screamed his name, her panic rising in increasingly strong waves. Then she heard a sound, an evenly pitched crackling.

She moaned and collapsed to the floor limply.

She revived, lying still, her eyes wide with terror of the unknown.

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Then she arose, staggered up the stairs, whispered into a phone.

Two policemen arrived, went downstairs. They came up, white and shaken. They sent for their sergeant, who heard what he heard, saw what he saw, and grabbed an ax. The ax merely made a loud noise and no dents at all. Even the portlike window was impervious. The sergeant called the chief of police, who then left and returned with the district attorney.

They asked Mirabelle questions, cocked their heads in puzzlement at the answers given.

The district attorney said to the chief of police:

"What do you make of it? She said time-traveling."

"Let's have a look."

They had a look. They tapped with their knuckles. They felt cold chills along their spines. Then they left. Within the day the district attorney summoned Wetstein, the physicist, one of the most prominent scientists in the world.

WETSTEIN was a roly-poly Dutchman. His hands were chubby and in the habit of gesticulating wildly. His face was round, with bulbous lips and nose. He stood in the laboratory, looking at Emanuel and the shadowy hulks of machines, his features puckered thoughtfully.

For a half-day there had been no sound. It had died away. Now it suddenly began again, a series of dry, spasmodic, evenly pitched sounds, indubitably emitted from the machine in which Emanuel Marcus Weck was incarcerated.

The district attorney jumped. Professor Wetstein clasped his chubby hands and beamed.

"It iss vonderful! Vonderful!"

"What's wonderful?" the other man asked, slightly confused.

"Everything iss vonderful! That man in there vould have been a great man. Alas, he chose to work unsung. He hass conquered time!"

The district attorney made an expression of unbelief.

"You do not have to believe me," the rotund professor said with heat. "You may believe the evidence of your eyes. He iss a time-traveler! He can travel in the future und he does not grow any older. That is time-travel! But if vun vishes to argue a point, vun says he iss not a time-traveler, since very probably he iss unable to travel into the past. Such a vun vould call the phenomenon a stasis in time."

"Now here's an interesting point," the attorney said. "The metal of this machine, even the glass of the window, is so tough that an ax won't dent it. Why not?"

"It iss not the metal that iss tough, it iss *time* that is. Yah, it iss time that is tough."

"Times is tough," the district attorney agreed dryly. "What about it, though?"

"Times iss tough. Yah! Your time, my time, iss tough. You cannot modify its flow. It goes on at the same rate. Not matter what you do, you will be dead and gone at the end of a hundred years. But that man in there? Hiss own time he hass made, und you cannot change it from the outside. Not mit an ax, not mit dynamite!

"The metal of that machine iss living slower, und that man iss living slower. Man und metal, both have mortality. Perhaps they are living years to the second, und maybe thousands of years." His eyes sparkled. "That iss vonderful!"

He lovingly ran his hands over the heavy machines which housed the motionless Emanuel Marcus Weck.

"Times iss tough," he ruminated. He stood back and watched the barely visible waviness that clothed the machine, a field of energy which enveloped it and extended no farther beyond it than a coating of dust extends from wallpaper. "It iss that force which controls the time-rate, und it will not admit another object from this rapid time of ours."

"How about that sound?"

"That," Wetstein declared, "iss the most amazing part of all! Doubly amazing since, first, it iss the result of Herr Weck's, vibrating vocal cords. Second, it iss not, in the fullest sense, hiss voice, yet he iss speaking. He iss saying something that vill not be known for years!"

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The district attorney sighed and wearily ground out his cigar on the cement floor.

"I guess I'm beginning to get it," he admitted uneasily. "You think he's speaking to his wife?"

"He iss saying his last words to her. Perhaps he iss trapped und he iss sending her some word of comfort. That iss what I think."

"How long would it take to get the message?"

The professor shrugged. "That I do not know, but it vill be years. He hass not moved, hass not changed a tendon of his face. Though he iss very probably speaking fast, he hass but started a single word. After three days, he has yet to finish the first letter of the vord. Listen!"

He closed his round, liquid eyes. It was like Morse code, transmitted by an amateur. Wetstein's features assumed an air of satisfaction. He opened his eyes.

"Vun single vibration from the larynx of Emanuel Weck, vun single vibration which we should not even hear! The threshold of audibility iss twenty cycles per second. The limit of audibility iss twenty thousand cycles per second. The lowest bass voice is ninety. The highest soprano, three hundred. Ve vill compute Weck's voice at vun hundred und ten cycles.

"In slowing hiss time-rate, therefore, the frequency vould drop so far below the threshold of hearing that we could not hear—except for vun very remarkable thing. There iss a vave-train born from each single vibration. It iss caused by the excitation of the air at the conjunction of the two different time-rates. The pitch iss such that it iss audible—a vave-train manufactured from an inaudible sound!"

"How do you expect to get the drift of what he's saying, Professor? You can't stand here and listen."

Wetstein snorted. "Ve will install an electrical transcription machine. It will record the voice, even if it takes years."

The other whistled. "That'll take millions of records!"

"You are thinking of money, when the greatest experiment of the ages iss upon us? *Pooh!* This room vill be a laboratory devoted to the voice, for making vave pictures with the oscillograph, for taking pictures of Veck's face to note the amount of movement over a period of time. At the end of months, ve vill be able to guess at the time-rate under vhich he lives. But now I must see Mrs. Veck."

Mirabelle's shock three days ago had temporarily incapacitated her. The district attorney remarked that she was probably asleep. Nonetheless Wetstein summoned a servant, who returned with the information that Mirabelle was awake and would see the scientist.

Her nurse opened the door when he knocked. He waddled forward hesitantly and, at Mirabelle's behest, seated himself.

"I have come," he said, "to give you my highest regards und to salute you. You are the wife of the most brilliant man in the vorld. He hass conquered time! But I principally wish to tell you, Mrs. Veck, of hiss attempt to communicate with you!"

Her eyes opened wide and she sat up in bed. Her lips parted.

"That sound? You don't mean—"

Wetstein nodded silently.

SHE sank back upon the pillows, a flush of red coming to her pale complexion.

"Tell me what he said," she breathed.

Wetstein looked astonished.

"What does he say? He hass said nothing! He hass not had time to say anything. The first vord vill take veeks, perhaps months. But when it comes through, you shall have it quickly."

Mirabelle smiled gloriously. With happy anticipation she would wait, for she remembered the kiss Emanuel had given her that morning he had gone away into time. He had determined to go and he had kissed her as an indication of his regret in leaving her alone. Now something had gone wrong, but in spite of that he was speaking to her across the immeasurable gulf which separated them.

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"Vun more thing," said Wetstein as he rose to his feet. "I do not know how your husband travels in time, but I am vild to know. Tomorrow, Mrs. Veck, if your illness is gone, you must accompany me to the laboratory. I vill ask you questions, the answers to which I must know."

Mirabelle smiled and nodded again. Wetstein murmured a good day and backed out.

He suspected the reason for Emanuel's dilatory motion through time but he needed Mirabelle's help to establish the proof.

She was secretly thrilled to know that Emanuel was seeking to communicate with her. The thought brought her to radiant, pulse-hammering health.

"He hasn't moved at all," she whispered, "except that he seems to be halfway through a blink and his lips are parted."

"Iss the head smaller since last you saw him in normal time?" Wetstein demanded.

She peered at Emanuel, paled, nodded haltingly.

"But very little," she insisted, turning to the scientist hopefully.

A SMILE blossomed on his cherubic features.

"Hiss head iss smaller," he said with satisfaction. "Hiss whole body is therefore smaller. The machine iss smaller, und the massive apparatus in it iss smaller. That explains the lowered time-rate. When a body travels in any direction vhatever, there iss a contraction in the dimension parallel to the motion. The faster the flight, the shorter the length und the slower the time-flow."

He regarded Emanuel with stolid complacency.

"But he did not use motion. He hass improved its effects on time by contracting through all dimensions. The farther he contracts, the slower vill he live. So it iss not so much time-travel as a partial stasis of time. It iss vonderful." His liquid eyes glowed as he met Mirabelle's excited ones. "And now, Mrs. Veck, you must prepare yourself for fame!"

WETSTEIN knew whereof he spoke. Only a day or so after Wetstein gave his attention to the remarkable condition of Emanuel Marcus Weck, reporters converged on the Weck estate.

Mirabelle became the heroine, Emanuel the hero, of a romance the public devoured with gusto. Emanuel, trapped, was calling out some word of comfort, reassurance, love to the blue-eyed, slender, smiling girl who was his wife.

Wetstein, as the giant explainer of all things in the Universe that baffled layman and scientist alike, acquired his share of prestige. People were always asking him about sound. One of his dreams was coming true—the world was proving itself science-minded.

Question: Of what is a sound-wave composed?

Answer: A succession of rarefactions und condensations in the air.

Question: Has a sound-wave ever been photographed?

Answer: Yah, but not practically as yet. The nearest approach iss vhen Sabine utilized the sound of an electric spark.

Question: Is an oscillogram an actual picture of a sound-wave?

Answer: It iss merely a representation. A real sound-wave hass no troughs and crests. It hass merely longitudinal characteristics.

People were suddenly interested in sound to the extent of studying acoustical subjects. Any man who knew phonetics was listened to with respect. In short, Emanuel's incredibly drawling voice echoed around the world.

Emanuel's laboratory became the depository of droves of phoneticians, acoustic engineers, writers, physicists, psychologists. It became necessary to weed them out. A dozen selected men remained—the Weck Staff, as they became known. And Wetstein, as agreed upon by the scientific societies sponsoring the project of recording Emanuel's voice, was their chief.

An electrical transcription machine was mounted, set to record record after record of Emanuel's pseudo-voice. A high quality oscillograph was installed, spinning off reel after

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reel of incomprehensible jagged lines.

The first word came through one month after Emanuel had entered his machine and started to speak. But it could not have been more than a second to him.

Reporters came. Mirabelle posed and cameras clicked. She smiled mysteriously, and answered their expectant question by giving them her own name. They were puzzled.

"He said 'Mirabelle!'" she insisted.

It was the most natural thing he could have said. Within an hour, so tense had been the interest of the public, every daily carried her name in headlines, with a six column cut of Mirabelle herself.

The securing of that single word marked a gigantic accomplishment. Thousands of records had to be condensed, other thousands used to obtain a final recording.

The original records were revolved at low velocities, the resultant sounds spread over a greater area on disks which rotated rapidly. An instrument, which consisted in part of a tiny reflector placed on the needle, photographed the ups and downs on a ribbon. Using a photo-electric cell, unnecessary waves were deleted. The phonograph needle lifted at strategic points, thereby recording on a third record Emanuel's enunciating, for example, some small fraction of the "R" sound.

EMANUEL had said "Mirabelle" and Mirabelle's delighted public waited for the next word. Meanwhile they read reams of copy describing changes in Emanuel's countenance.

For three months there was not a sound, however. Up to that time, Emanuel's features had noticeably undergone a change of expression. The degrees of motion had been photographed so that a moving picture could be thrown on a screen. His mouth had closed tightly. His expression, as the journals defined it, was one of utmost gravity. His complexion seemed steadily lightening, probably due to the mental strain under which he spoke.

His voice began again and speculation doubled. What would he say?

What he did say was a disappointment, but it was characteristic. Emanuel repeated his wife's name.

Four months rolled by. He had receded a single step from the circular window and blinked thirteen times. His lips had opened and moved four times. His complexion was still lightening, though by merest shades. And at the end of that time he had said:

"Do you hear me?"

Mirabelle threw herself against the window and wept.

"I hear you, Emanuel! I hear you!"

The cameras clicked and the love story grew to epic proportions. Everyone from little boys to pipe-puffing oldsters grew still more excited when Emanuel said:

"I want you."

The face had changed again. The lips were thin and white. The eyes, behind the famous tortoise-shell glasses, flamed with a fierce inner light, which facile psychologists described as arising from an emotion too agonizing for mere tonal inflections to depict.

Four and a half months later, Emanuel had ground out:

"Do you hear me?"

This was his second iteration. It did not advance the story much.

Mirabelle felt strangely futile.

"I hear him," she wailed to Wetstein, "but I can't tell him! Maybe he'll just keep asking and asking and asking. And what will I do?

"You must not worry," the physicist said firmly. "Some time Emanuel will come out. He iss not living so very slow. Some day—"

He did not finish. Both knew that that "some day" was far, far in the future.

Again Emanuel repeated himself. His speech became the most nerve-racking and lengthy one ever to fall on the ears of an attentive world. His communication now stood this way:

Mirabelle . . . Mirabelle . . . Do you hear me? I want you . . . Do you hear me? I want you.

Now that people were becoming used to this repetition, the following

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surprise was welcome. It appeared that the last "I want you" had merely been the beginning of a sentence, as the first would have been, had Emanuel not cut it short. He went on and added the words "to come."

But what did he mean by that? Did he want her to come to him? That seemed impossible. Mirabelle was confused. She waited, even as the world waited.

THEY waited for one year and five months. The reason was that Wetstein was not always in attendance, acting in his official capacity as chief of the Weck Staff. He lived on the other side of the continent. Now and again he returned to supervise matters. On such occasions he was Mirabelle's guest.

During these times, Mirabelle spoke freely of her former life with Emanuel, of his desire to secure a ringside seat at the scene of the dynamic death struggles of the Universe.

Wetstein's blue eyes narrowed in thought. An idea was coming to him that he dared not entertain before.

When Emanuel added the words "to come," Wetstein began hovering about the machine in which the famous lover was trapped. He watched the endless revolutions of disks, studied oscillograms, regarded the unending condensation of huge stacks of records. And suddenly occurred what he had half-expected.

The first few days of silence on the part of the Weck Staff brought reporters. Their questions were met by Wetstein. There was a sullen look on the physicist's suddenly flaccid features. His eyes flashed savagely.

"Why should you care what he says?" he snarled. "Busybodies! He iss saying nothing. He hass ceased. He iss silent!"

The reporters were bewildered.

"Well, let us in so we can get the latest dope."

"You cannot get in. There iss a delicate experiment. I vill not let you in until Emanuel begins again, und he may never do that. Good-by!"

He slammed the door.

It was an acceptable explanation. Emanuel was silent and there was an important experiment which must not be subjected to outside disturbances. Mirabelle believed it. The scientific societies sponsoring the Weck Staff believed it.

There was comparative peace for Wetstein for six months. Then reporters came again.

"If he isn't speaking, why not let us in? Don't give us that boloney again about an experiment."

Wetstein started. "You may tell the vorld that the delicate experiment continues und that it must not disturb me."

But months later, Wetstein did not have so easy a time. Mirabelle smelled something in the wind. All was not as it should be. She got hold of Wetstein, demanded that he let her into the laboratory. After all, Emanuel was her husband, experiment or no experiment.

Wetstein started to sweat.

"You must trust me. My dear vun, it would be fatal for you to enter the laboratory." He hastily added: "It iss the experiment. It must be handled mit care. The least tremor—"

He sidled swiftly away and left Mirabelle staring after him, brows knitted.

WETSTEIN put off everybody for one year and three months. At the end of that time his obstinacy broke down under the insistent proddings of his subordinate.

"It can't go on!" that person snapped, glaring at his chief. "Lies, lies, lies—Emanuel isn't talking, delicate experiments! I've stood by you long enough. Now I'm through." He slapped a vehement hand on the table. "I don't care what the world thinks. I don't care what Mirabelle thinks. Have it over with. Look at you—pale, losing weight!"

Wetstein slumped to a chair, a pitifully strained expression on his face. Then he straightened and his lips screwed up savagely. He arose.

"Der Teufel!" he exclaimed with the air of one manufacturing courage. "I am a fool. I should have known. Give me, please, paper und pencil."

He sat down and wrote, but his hand trembled. Clutching the slip of pa-

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per, he arose and despondently waddled up the stairway and into the library where Mirabelle was reading.

She stood up, grim determination in her eyes. He waved a heavy hand.

"No need of that, Mirabelle." Slowly he held the slip of paper out to her, winced when she took it from him. "It iss the message, so far as we have gone."

She smoothed the paper out between her hands and dropped her eyes to it, the flush of anticipation coloring her rounded cheeks. She read.

Wetstein watched, his cherubic features miserable.

Then she reread it. Her face went white. The paper fluttered from her fingers, and Wetstein stepped forward in time to catch her limp body.

He carried her to her room, berating himself steadily and helplessly. And on the library floor lay the paper containing Emanuel's message, as far as it had gone.

Mirabelle . . . Mirabelle! Do you hear me? I want you. . . . Do you hear me? I want you to come down here! Blast it, do I have to yell myself hoarse?

So the world learned that it had not been an epic of love stretching across the barren years, but an anecdote of a man picking a post-breakfast squabble with his wife.

Whatever love Mirabelle had for Emanuel was gone like a shadow in the night. It was not the fact that he had spoken as he did—his outbursts of temper had previously evidenced themselves—but the more terrible fact that it had been made public. She had never suspected, even remotely, the possibility of his oral abuse becoming a subject for world-wide audition.

Emanuel talked on, unaware of everything that happened, unaware that he was traveling in time. Every word he said was made public. Each one brought a laugh that shook Mirabelle to the very marrow of her bones.

AT the end of seven years and eight months, Emanuel's dragging soliloquy finally ceased forever. He had said:

"Mirabelle . . . Mirabelle! Do you hear me? I want you. . . . Do you hear me? I want you to come down here. Blast it, do I have to yell myself hoarse? Get down here quick. The door's caught, stuck. I want to get out. MIRABELLE!"

During this time he had turned entirely away from the window, had approached the door. Now it was quite apparent that anger, not grief, showed on his face. And his voice, contrary to the wishful thinking of the press, had been harsh, irascible, with snarling intonations.

As he uttered Mirabelle's name for the last time, he threw his full weight against the door.

Another year went by, in which he turned about, obviously panting, not from exertion, but from anger. His furious eyes swung, over a period of months, to the ponderous machinery occupying more than half the space inside his machine. They held there, staring. Slowly the face lost its anger, showed puzzlement. The eyes narrowed.

Emanuel's whole face creased in amazement as he slowly fell to his knees, staring at a series of progressively smaller levers on a vertical instrument panel near the door. His attention riveted itself on the smallest, a lever obviously out of line with its fellows. For months of stupefaction he stared at it. In the space of three more weeks, he thrust a startled glance at the little window. Complete, sudden comprehension swept his face.

Without rising to his feet, he started to bring his hands up—trembling hands which closed on the four larger, unthrown levers. The world knew they were the levers controlling the intensity of the energy field surrounding the machine.

Wetstein was there at the weird conclusion of this everlasting drama. Reporters placed him in a state of siege.

"You vant to know about Emanuel, hiss various actions during the past years, und vot he iss doing now?" The physicist's voice was mellower. His hair had grayed, but he had never lost the exclamatory force punctuating every sentence. "I vill tell! Ten

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years ago he vent into hiss machine. The door closed behind him. He brushed against a small lever. He did not know that it released in small intensities the energy permeating the machine.

"Perhaps, having forgotten something in the room outside, he tried to open the door. It vould not open, since it could not push through the energy field. Then, before hiss time had begun to slow, he valked across to the window. He called to Mirabelle, but it took him one month to do so. She could not answer. He became angry.

"The rest is known. He discovered the thrown lever, realized that he could travel in time. He knew then that he was an object of vorld interest, but he did not care for fame. All he cared to see vas the heat-death, the state of maximum entropy, the greatest distribution of all the energy in the Universe—a time that lies unmentionable decillions of years in the future!

"He iss now doing that vhich shall slow his time until, in comparison mit ours, the ratio will be smaller than vun to vun million raised to the millionth power!" He shook his head at other questions. "A few days remain. Just vatch!"

His liquid eyes held an expression of inner amusement, as if he knew something they did not.

THE time came when Emanuel, applying the whole force of his body, threw his levers.

His laboratory was filled to overflowing with visitors, utterly silent and awed. Mirabelle was cold, frightened. Wetstein, his mild eyes gay with a wicked anticipation, stood beside her. They waited for the beginning of that stupendous drama.

A man was preparing flight from his own time to another that was unutterably remote, for the sole purpose of witnessing the struggle of a universe in the talons of an incorruptible cosmic law.

It began. That hardly discernible effulgence brightened, heightened. Hundreds of faces glowed with its radiance. Not a sound broke the silence. Wetstein's features became rosy, sinfully gay.

The machine abruptly began to lose girth. It was shrinking visibly, like a punctured tire. There was a scraping sound as its metal bottom pulled itself along the floor toward its center of mass. The upper part settled. The four sides approached each other. There was no perceptible distortion.

The lactescence increased, proportionate to the shrinkage. Little streamers of fire licked questingly at the air, dropped back, leaped again. The machine fell in on itself and the creaking, elfin sound as it drew itself over the cement paving became the only sound in an unreal world.

Minutes dragged, but to Emanuel the time was an unthinkably small part of a second. He was on his way to the heat-death!

Shrinking, shrinking, bathed in a wreathing of white flame that radiated no detectable heat, the machine became an evanescent cube a foot square, six inches, three, an inch, a half, still less. And then it was invisible, save for its lacteal cloak.

There was only a vague cracking sound, fairylike in its attenuations. Suddenly there was nothing, not even the glow, only a spidery convergence of lines in the floor.

The soundlessness in the room seemed to intensify. Mirabelle trembled slightly, staring with wide eyes at the cracks in the cement.

Finally a reporter elbowed his way through a crowd that erupted with cries of horror, prayers and wonder. He caught hold of Wetstein's arm.

"What happened?" he gasped.

A half-dozen others of his profession ringed Wetstein and Mirabelle, as if by magic.

Wetstein chuckled. "Emanuel hass gone to hiss heat-death, but he will not know it. He did not realize that, in slowing time, the machine vould shrink. If he had know it, he vould not have gone. He did not know that the machine vould become too heavy for the small area on vhich it rested. He did not know it vould get so heavy, it vould crack right through the crust of the Earth!

"He vill go straight to the center

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of the Earth. There he vill become subjected to such intense heat, his machine und him vill be burnt to vun little cinder. Even hiss time iss not so tough that it can resist the terrific, dimension-tvisting pressures at the molten, liquid core of the Earth!"

HE rolled out the words with relish as he met Mirabelle's blue eyes. Her hand stole out to his, clutched it with a desperate need for strength and understanding. She found them there.

"Yah, Emanuel hass gone to hiss heat-death," concluded Professor Wetstein, "but not the vun he dreamt of! A man mit his sharp tongue und evil temper und complete selfishness, he did not deserve such a vonderful voman for a vife. Gentlemen, mit Mirabelle's kind permission, I vould like to announce our engagement to be married."

She did not contradict him, and the world had a new sensation, much more pleasant than the love affair that had proved itself a ten-year squabble.

HEADLINERS IN THE NEXT ISSUE

WITH frank curiosity the old gentleman in the War Ministry office studied the new-fledged Major Winter who was resplendent in his new uniform of the Labradorean Engineering Corps.

"What are you willing to do, what are you willing to sacrifice, young man," he asked, "to bring this war against the democracies to a close?"

"I would go through hell, sir," replied Major Winter with such a fierce intensity that for a moment he startled the other man.

Then:

"Ah," replied the civil service gentleman. "Perhaps you will do just that. At their own insistence, your corps has been assigned to a very daring undertaking. It is no less a project than the immediate invasion of Germany and the capture of Berlin."

With this, it was Jack Winter's turn to be amazed. The idea was incredible—insane! But the British War Department meant it. And a certain scientist, working away in his laboratory, had made this idea possible. And Major Jack Winter finds himself plunged backward into time—into the most fantastic and amazing expedition ever sent forth in the military history of the world. TIME COLUMN! Don't miss TIME COLUMN, the featured complete novel in next issue, by Malcolm Jameson.

* * * *

OFFERED next is the first story of a trilogy—THE ROBOT SAGA, by Ray Cummings. This splendid series of the fall and rise of mankind starts with DECADENCE, the golden age of the civilization of the future, and works out the destiny of the human race from there. Cummings turns on the robot juice with a vengeance.

* * * *

NEXT comes the second yarn in that striking and unusual series by Frank Belknap Long about the botanist detective of the twenty-first century. SNAPDRAGON, a weird and startling adventure in plants, is yet as different from the first story as it is possible for a pair of yarns to be. This second experience of Curator John Carstairs and his lovely assistant, Vera Dorn, will snap you to the edge of your seat.

* * * *

DAMES IS POISON will be welcome news to you adherents of Pete Manx, the time traveler unique, created by Kelvin Kent. Pete gets all tangled up with his pestiferous little nephew and then with the renowned Borgia family of medieval Italy. This will kill you!

* * * *

LEVENING up things with a tender little yarn appropriate to the season, we've held CHRISTMAS ON MARS, by William Morrison, several months in order to hand it to you with the season's greetings. You won't forget this one throughout many a day to come.

* * * *

REMAINS now but to remind you of the special features, fact articles and departments which are sprinkled through each and every issue of THRILLING WONDER STORIES to liven it up for your entertainment. Boy, what an issue the next one is going to be!

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THE KITCHEN OF THE FUTURE

By WILLY LEY

Famous Author of "The Lunafish and the Unicorn," and Many Other Science Books and Features

CHECKING up on roughly ten dozen Science Fiction stories, I have made the rather startling discovery that, generally speaking, the people of the future do not eat. At least, not those of the slightly more distant future, say, after the general introduction of space travel.

What the stories tell about that future consists of descriptions of all kinds of ships, tanks and war machines. They elaborate on observatories, undersea look-out posts, power plants and laboratories. They describe living-rooms of utmost luxury, bedrooms, bathrooms and night clubs. They describe hats and dresses.

But they never, never mention a kitchen. It really seems as if the people living in those marvelous apartments do not eat at all. They smoke tobacco and worse things, they drink all kinds of weird beverages, they indulge in various vile drugs . . . but they do not eat.

Pills for Palates

Ten years ago they used to swallow food pills. Three pills a day kept them well-fed, healthy and happy. Many writers employed such food pills for purposes of what they believed to be realism. But I am quite sure that only a few of them knew that this idea originated with the great French chemist, Marcellin Berthelot—who, in an off-moment, forgot that carbohydrates cannot be compressed—and that people would be very unhealthy if it could be done.

Anyway, authors learned that such "pills" would have to weigh about a pound apiece, and the practice was abandoned.

Reversion to Type

Only when hero and heroine are marooned on another planet do they revert to type. They go out in search of food and prepare ambitious meals (eggs *always* turn out to be scrambled in the end, no matter what you try to do to them) and a kind of Martian *shashlik*—pieces of liver or meat strung up on a strand of stainless steel wire from a space suit in the spare locker of the wrecked rocket ship and fried by means of a heat-ray pistol.

But as soon as those hardy pioneers get back to civilization they again eat "a kind of porridge with some solid particles in it, containing all the necessary fats, proteins, carbohydrates, minerals and vitamins, of grayish color and practically tasteless."

Well, if they really do, I begin to understand why they abuse their knowledge of bio-chemistry to invent new and potent drinks, not caring a split-atom whether those drinks are habit-forming or not.

No Soup or Spinach

However, we can be certain that intelligent people of the future won't eat such a tasteless soup. On the contrary, they will have a menu that is as superior to ours as ours to that of our grandparents.

It seems to have been taken pretty much for granted how greatly menus have improved—in variety at least, even if not always in quality—during the last fifty or sixty years. The kitchen of the past was severely restricted, to mention but one cause, by the fact that there are seasons.

Certain things grew in one season and did not grow in another and most of the things that did grow were extremely perishable. Some, but only some, could be stored. These became the staple diets, the "staff of life." The others had to remain temporary ornaments of the table.

Then, of course, one country produced fruits or vegetables (I am using this term as broadly as possible) which another did not. If you wanted taste them you had to go to their native habitat. They could not be brought to you because they would spoil before they had completed only a part of the trip necessary to bring them to your table.

Remember the amazement attendant on the dinner served by the Count of Monte Cristo when he has Muscovite ducks from Russia and fruits from semi-tropic lands rushed to his table by a private sort of pony express. And this was considered sufficient novelty for Alexandre Dumas to make an elaborate point of it in the nineteenth century.

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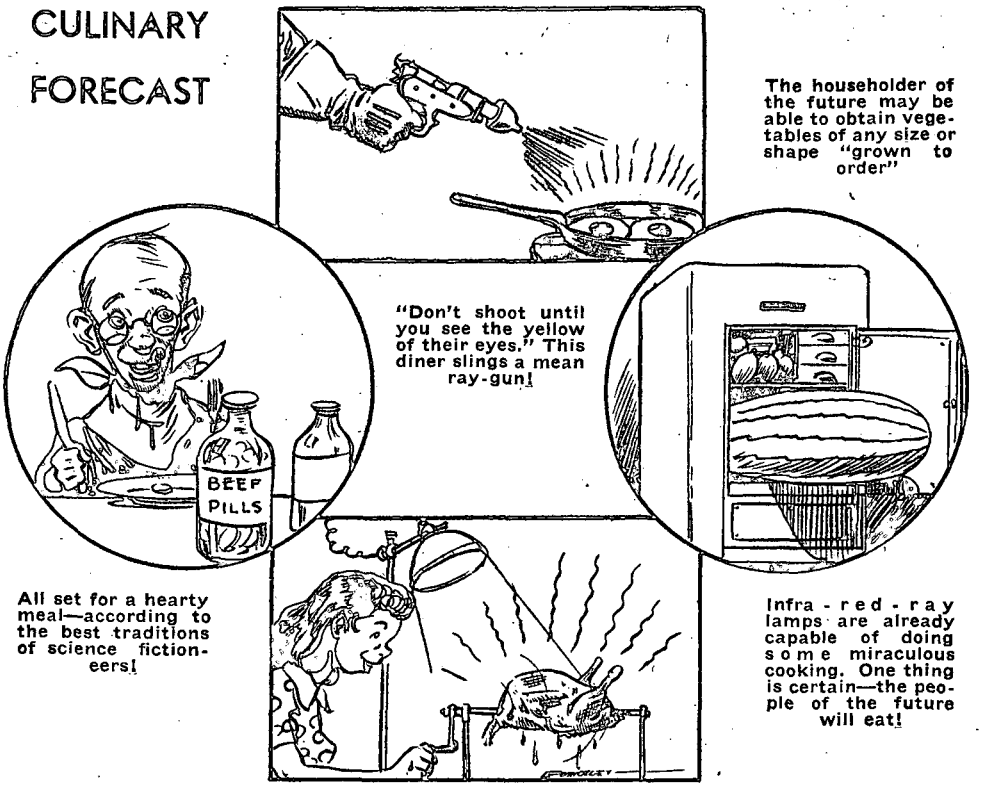
CULINARY
FORECAST
The householder of the future may be able to obtain vegetables of any size or shape "grown to order"
"Don't shoot until you see the yellow of their eyes." This diner slings a mean ray-gun!
BEEF PILLS
All set for a hearty meal—according to the best traditions of science fictioneers!
Infra-red-ray lamps are already capable of doing some miraculous cooking. One thing is certain—the people of the future will eat!

None of these restrictions exist any more.

The Streamlined Twentieth Century

Modern fast freight trains and freight vessels, in beautifully timed cooperation with local delivery trucks haul perishable goods under refrigeration in a day over the the same distance that once required a week or more.

Tin cans and "quick freeze" cartons deliver "early fresh garden peas" any time all year round, and could do so even if goods were still shipped on mule-back. Significantly enough, the term "in season" has now come to mean mainly "inexpensive."

But while engineers and bacteriologists have contributed their share in eliminating the seasons from our menus the chemists and, especially, the agriculturists have not been idle.

Dirtless Farming

Chemical methods have led to a wide application of "hydroponics"—the growing of plants without soil in nutrient solutions. While it *works* beautifully with practically all varieties of plants, it is not equally efficient with all of them. It is not efficient, for example, with wheat, corn, and other grains.

The main advantage of hydroponics is that the quality of the soil on which the solution tray rests does not matter and it therefore permits to grow, say, melons where no melon would grow ordinarily, and in combination with a greenhouse it permits to grow crops all year round. This method has already attained a much higher commercial importance than most people realize and it is of extraordinary value in special cases, like, for example, island bases.

It is well known that the China Clippers of Pan American Airways are being supplied with tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuce and other fresh vegetables from such a "hydroponicum" on Wake Island, where these vegetables would hardly grow outside a solution tray.

Burbanks of Today

Even more important than hydroponics are the efforts of scientific gardeners and botanists to make "vegetables to order." Next time you buy carrots (no matter whether fresh or canned) look whether you can still find the yellow core. The answer is probably that you can't; modern carrot breeds are orange all the way through.

At the same time you may notice that they are straight and of almost uniform thickness in their entire length. The yellow core was eliminated because soup manu-

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facturers claimed that the yellow or partly yellow cubes produced by dicing looked bad. The straightness and uniform thickness were developed for reasons of bundling and handling.

The all-orange carrots are only one among numerous achievements in the field of breeding for size and convenience as well as for hardiness of the plant, flavor and taste of its product. There exists now a straight-necked squash with a fairly smooth skin. There are "straight-eight" cucumbers, straight, of uniform thickness and uniform length (about eight inches, hence the name). Oranges, are seedless, beans are stringless, cabbage is odorless, corn is wormless, raspberries, strawberries and blackberries are bigger, and watermelons smaller so as to fit the modern refrigerator. Peaches are not yet fuzzless, but plant breeders are trying hard to produce them.

This list of improvements is augmented steadily by new plants—"new" meaning new to Western agriculture.

Hail the Spaghetti Tree

During the last war soldiers liked to make the joke in letters that they were, of course, not permitted to name the spot where they were fighting, but that they were writing in the shadow of a spaghetti tree. Even jokes come true occasionally. A Canadian firm recently announced the importation of "vegetable spaghetti", though not from Italy. The announcement runs as follows:

This new vegetable from Persia thrives in all climates and in any ordinary garden soil. Each plant produces from six to ten bright yellow oblong fruits about 8 to 10 inches long. Each fruit is filled with a spaghetti-like pulp. When fully ripe, the whole fruit (without cutting or peeling) should be cooked twenty minutes in boiling water; then cut in half. A dishful of vegetable spaghetti comes out of each fruit. Season with salt, pepper and butter and serve hot, or cold as a salad, with mayonnaise or French dressing. This remarkable vegetable is one of the most valuable and useful of recent introductions.

Crown Prince Vitamin

In addition to improving nature, man improves on his own work. We are just now experiencing a bread revolution. Not bread in pills—as in obsolete science fiction—but pills in the bread. I refer to the new "re-enforced" or vitaminized bread, and flour.

It was an obvious step to add in synthetic form the vitamins lost for other reasons. But no matter how obvious a step may be, it sometimes is a long time until it is taken, and on occasion it might even be difficult to take such a step. It was, for example, known for a long time that ultra-violet light has sterilizing properties, but the development of a practical, inexpensive and easily operated sterilizing lamp was another and rather devious story.

Synthetic Food?

But what about synthetic food, long a staple diet in most future communities? I could answer that there will be no need for it, but instead I quietly report that a synthetic protein is already in mass production. Only we don't eat it since it happens to be an inedible protein. It has a name: Nylon.

The British magazine, *Plastics*, commented on that fact:

How much more would we thank Dr. Carothers if he had devoted those years to producing a protein that would be more digestible than his nylon, which is so tough and not readily attacked by the gastric juices. Think of having a dozen chemical factories here turning out tens of thousands of tons of juicy nylon, already treated with dozens of vitamins and doses of the appropriate salts, extruded into just the right size for making sandwiches.

And while I do not believe that synthetic food will ever completely replace grown or cultivated food, the implications of that British comment show clearly just when such knowledge would be useful.

The marooned hero, of course, will still need his heat-ray pistol to fry *shashlik*. But he won't have to strain his ingenuity to invent this trick, because it will always be done that way. Infra-red-ray lamps exist already, and they are good for some miraculous cooking. Properly focused, they fry hamburgers inside a refrigerator without melting the ice cubes. "Cooking infra-red-ray lamps" are even patented already and may soon be common.

All of which makes me positive that the people of the future will eat. Maybe not exactly what we eat now, but with a greater variety of choice and much better quality —and with plenty of roughage.

What? You'll still take vanilla? Well, I'll take ham and cheese on rye, with a side dish of sliced onions.

NOW IS THE TIME TO JOIN THE

SCIENCE FICTION LEAGUE

SEE COUPON AND FULL PARTICULARS IN
"LOOKING FORWARD," PAGES 118 AND 119 THIS ISSUE!

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A Space Ship Cook Whips Up a Recipe for Revenge When Future Pirates Try to Grab All the Gravy!

"Have you finished that cook-book yet, Reynolds?" taunted the fat pirate

HOT CARGO

By BILL BRUDY

Author of "Dosage," "The Avenging Cube," etc.

ABOUT a minute after Captain Greg Caldwell cut the *Rigel's* rockets for her turn halfway to the Moon, Dal Reynolds came tumbling forward along the ship's handrail. The things he was saying would have corroded a hole in the floor plates if they hadn't been made of cuproberyl. He eased through the open deck-hatch and hung there, clutching the rail while dabbing at a smear on his flight jacket.

Glaring balefully at the broad, green-clad shoulders of Greg Caldwell, he barked:

"Next time you do that, push the

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green button and warn a guy, will you?"

The green-clad shoulders turned inquiringly. The face above them wore a sheepish grin.

"Sorry, Dal. I must have been thinking of something else. Did I spill the *pate de fois gras?*"

"Very funny," sneered Dal. "Did you ever try to make cup custard in a rocket ship's galley when she's in free fall?"

Greg's eyebrows hiked up a notch.

"Can't say that I have, not being the most notorious space cook now at large."

"Well, it's messy, that's what it is. Especially when the custard won't stay in the double-boiler. It floats around, gets on your nice clean uniform, and scalds you in the back of the neck when you're not looking. How about giving her just a grunt of positive acceleration, enough to flatten that stuff so I can clean it up?"

Greg shrugged. "Sure, if you'd like the job of readjusting our velocity charts afterward. An extra ounce of soup right now might send us clear past the Moon."

Dal smeared unguentine on his neck and gave a nasty laugh.

"Didn't I see old Crusty Leonard bring a ship into Tycho once with two crippled jets and a pilot with a skull-fracture? He hadn't even kept velocity charts for seven hours."

"Neither of us is a second Crusty Leonard," answered Greg tolerantly. "And besides, Crusty was ferrying a load of sheets and mattresses that time, not precision instruments like ours. You can wrangle a ship around plenty without a delicate cargo."

Dal snorted again.

"Precision instruments! That's good. All the precision instruments on this wagon are mounted on the control panel."

GREG CALDWELL looked murderously at Dal.

"You talk too much—and too loud."

"What's the matter, Cap? Afraid a stray meteoroid'll hear me?"

"And you haven't been funny," Greg added, "since the last time you fell out of your baby buggy."

Reynolds stared. "Say, you act like an old maid with a bad corn. What's up, anyway? You know that nobody but us knows about the . . . the . . ."

"The cargo, yes. But I only think nobody else knows of it I'm not sure. The day before we left, Dal, old man Hartridge—the atomic power bigshot—disappeared. The funny part of it is that he was gone only a few hours. He was finally discovered tottering around in one of his suites of offices in New York. Funnier still, he didn't know what had happened to him, had no memory of where he had been or how he got there.

"It probably doesn't mean a thing. An overfed old sociophagus like Hartridge could have an attack of anything, I suppose, even amnesia. But our little mission is all wrapped up with Hartridge, because he is all wrapped up with the Institute's observatory on the Moon. He was the one who talked the Institute's directors into junking the Sun power plant they use up there on Luna and installing an atomic unit in its place.

"Since you and I are such a flossy pair of meteoroid-dodgers, we get a personal assignment from old Hartridge himself to truck the atomic unit up there, together with the hundred pounds of uranium that makes it tick. Then, to make everything ducky, Hartridge does a vanishing act just before we leave. Does that stir up any thoughts in that vacant skull of yours?"

"Kind of funny," Reynolds admitted, scowling. "But there's no connection—"

"Apparently not." Greg rubbed his forehead thoughtfully. "None, at least, that can be seen. But remember, Dal, we're lugging a cargo that's more valuable than any amount of precision instruments could be. Uranium is still a precious metal in spite of improved methods of extraction, and the secret of the new power reaction isn't what you'd call common property, either."

Dal nodded soberly. "Foreign powers, maybe, huh?"

"Possibly," agreed Greg, "though not necessarily. There's another observatory on the Moon. A smaller

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outfit, but better equipped than the one belonging to the American Institute. And the tension between them is a perfect example of what high finance and commercialization can do to a scientific organization when it's applied wrong. They're jealous about everything.

"It simply cooks down to this. That bunch down in *Mare Tranquilitatis* are going sky-high when they hear about this new power business, if they haven't already. So far they have the classiest layout and location on Luna, but an atomic installation will put Tycho ahead of them. I don't know what they'll do or how they'll do it. All I know is that they won't take it sitting down."

CALDWELL grinned and reached over to slap Dal's slender, sinewy shoulder.

"Whatever happens, we'll just watch out."

"Right!" Dal said enthusiastically. "And any space-roach that starts messin' around had better watch out, too. Crusty's crew down at Tycho aren't sissies. In fact, a good scrap would suit them just fine."

"Yeah," agreed Greg sourly. "But you can bet your best skillet that whatever happens won't happen at Tycho."

Ignoring Dal's surprised stare, Greg turned back the sleeve of his jacket and stared at the tiny, jerking hands of the navigator's chronometer on his wrist. At the proper second, his lean arm moved. A lever came down a notch, and the floor slapped his feet gently as the rockets' slow stutter became audible.

"There, does that satisfy you?" he asked. "That custard storm in the galley should have died down by now. You'd better moisten your mop and get the joint cleaned up. And lay off the fancy cookery from here on in."

Half an hour later Greg inquired amiably whether Dal had done all his housework.

"Yeah," the cook growled. "I don't know which would have been easier, though—to have mopped the stuff up, or to have gone in there with a butterfly net while it was all still floatin'."

Grumbling under his breath, he slid into the dual seat and strapped down.

"One way," muttered Greg, squinting through a port at the shrinking Earth, "would be to forget how to cook."

"Oh you forget how to eat," Dal snapped back. "Say, what was that crack you made about my skillet? What did he say to you? Has that old fossil got enemies, or what?"

"You mean Hartridge? Did you ever hear of a utilities magnate who didn't have enemies? No, he didn't tell me anything definite. In fact, what he did tell me didn't sound serious until we were about ten hours out, when I finally had time to think of it."

He fished in his shirt for a pack of gum, gave Dal a stick and took one himself.

"Apparently," he said, unwrapping it, "Hartridge is just half a corporation. He had a partner once, but they didn't see eye-to-eye on certain things. It seems the other guy was too much scientist and not enough business man, so he cashed in his share of stock and toddled off to be alone with his equations. He couldn't have been the dope Hartridge thought, or else he must have learned plenty, because he's gone places since.

"He happens to be old Northrup, the head of Tranquilitatis Observatory. Hartridge claims he's crazy, but the old coot is probably just blasting. It dawns on me now that the whole thing ties together perfectly, though, Northrup and Hartridge hating each other. Discrimination and favoritism stewing under the surface, and us trucking the ato-unit which is the bone of contention. . . ."

He shrugged apprehensively.

"Gosh!" Dal muttered. "They don't hate each other enough to get tough about it, do they?"

"I don't know. Northrup was plenty bitter, and an atomic power unit would be a mighty important item. You can do lots of things with it that you can't with Sun power, like maintaining meteoroid-deflection fields.

Dal watched critically as Greg performed a minute adjustment on the

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control panel of the *Rigel.*

"Northrup is supposed to have a super-charged brain," he said. "And he was in on the basic development along with old Hartridge. Why couldn't he improvise his own unit?"

Greg shook his head. "Ato-units take uranium, which can't be extracted practically from the Moon and can't be taken off the Earth without special permit. Hartridge has him where the hair is short, all right. They'll probably keep right on using solar power over there and liking it, unless Northrup is willing to say 'Uncle.'"

Dal yawned, then swore as the detector-gong jangled. The steering rockets drove the ship out of the path of an approaching meteoroid.

"I don't see, though," he went on, after easing himself comfortably once more behind his taut safety straps, "what we've got to stew over. Just because we're knee-deep in motives doesn't necessarily mean Northrup would have the gall to do anything. What could he do, anyhow?"

Caldwell thought silently for a moment.

"Nothing, I guess. Still he's a resourceful cuss, ambitious and a little unsettled, if what Hartridge said is true. And that observatory of his—I've wondered sometimes about it."

Dal yawned again and picked up a ruled and numbered sheet from the chart table.

"You're going to be bitin' yourself in the back of the neck if you don't quit stewin.' Help me check velocity, will you?"

"Okay." Greg surveyed his instruments. "Absolute vertical, eight-five-five-seven. Tangential, forty. Deceleration, one and one-eighth Gs. Gravitational decrement—"

"Tycho to *Rigel.* Tycho station to space ship *Rigel.* Emergency! Come in quickly, please!"

Dal Reynolds snapped up in his seat. Crisp and clear in the control room crackled the urgent voice of Stedman, the Tycho operator. Anxiously it repeated the call.

"Come in, *Rigel!* Emergency!"

Dal's fingers cut in his transmitter. "*Rigel* acknowledging. Come in, Tycho!"

Greg Caldwell, hair and shirt awry, hopped through the deck-hatch like a startled gopher from its hole. Dozing in his bunk, he had heard Stedman's staccato message. He bent over the communicator.

The signals drowned themselves in static for a moment. Then Stedman's voice cut in again, oddly hurried and breathless.

"Reynolds? Get this. You can't land here! Do you understand? You can't land in Tycho at all. The landing cradles have been wrecked in an explosion!"

"Take it over, Sted," Greg said quietly. "Slower."

STEDMAN was babbling aimlessly. His voice faded and for a time was blotted out in a stuttering, incoherent roar of static. Miraculously it cleared. When Stedman spoke again, his voice was still hoarse and rasping, but stronger.

"Sorry," he gasped. "The concussion split a window seam in the tower here, and the air leaked out before I knew what was going on. I barely got a suit on in time."

He choked, swallowed and began again.

"There has been an explosion in or near the cradles and they've been wrecked beyond immediate repair. To try a landing on them would be suicide. You'll have to settle into an orbit and wait. It'll only take about fifty hours to repair the damage."

Dal and Greg looked at each other, suddenly stricken.

"We can't, Sted," Caldwell said hollowly. "The cargo was heavy this trip and our fuel was rationed to the last pound. We haven't even enough to maneuver in on a jet landing, and it would probably wreck us if we tried. These ships aren't balanced for rough stuff."

"And you can't land at Tranquilitatis, either!"

"Why not?" snapped Dal.

"Because it was a posse of Northrup's men who did the work on these cradles."

Even Stedman's habitual and calm crispness could not hide the cold fury in his voice. "It was as pretty a case

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of sabotage as you'll ever see. The obvious purpose was to drive you into landing there instead of here. I thought I was the only one on the Moon who knew about your cargo. But Northrup must know, too."

Greg nodded as though he were facing Stedman.

"I begin to get it," he muttered bitterly.

"There were three of them," continued Stedman, between coughs. "Three men in a small rocket-sled landed on the pumice flat north of here and taxied through the dust to within a few hundred feet of the cradles. Before anyone could guess what the devils were up to, they had hopped out and thrown half a dozen charges into different parts of the cradles.

"Debris flew all over. It was a chunk of metal that struck the tower here and sprung a seam. Two power domes have been punctured and evacuated. The pressure-stat system is out of order, so the air-pressure is no longer maintained automatically. Everyone is wearing suits against the possibility of getting caught near a slow leak."

"Are you positive who did it?" Greg asked tautly.

"Yes," cried Stedman. "Crusty took out a sled of our own and ran them down. They hightailed it straight for Tranquilitatis. And as if this weren't crazy enough now, the observatory down there is armed! They have heavy-caliber machine-guns mounted to fire through flexible, airtight blisters. They even rattled a few slugs off Crusty's sled before he drew out of range. Of all the crazy, senseless things to do—"

"Don't try to figure it out," snapped Greg. "Right now we've got to learn how to stay alive."

THE situation, he realized, was desperate. The *Rigel*, dropping steadily toward her rendezvous at Tycho, was still twenty hours off the Moon. But from Stedman's description, the smashed cradles couldn't even be propped up in that time. Fuel had been cut to a minimum by the weight of the massive atomic power unit. It would never cover the complicated maneuvering necessary to throw them into an orbit about the Moon, through which they could wait days, if necessary, for repairs.

They were in the midst of the deadliest, most inescapable situation young Greg Caldwell had ever encountered.

A jet landing, dangerous as it was, seemed the only hope. He had to bring the ship indirectly on flaring rockets. But while doing that, horrible things could happen. Greg had seen a ship come in that way once. She had hoppled on her side with rockets still firing and had raced forty miles cross-country, until she battered herself to pieces.

But Greg Caldwell was the master the *Rigel*. There was a centuries-old tradition of a master and the ship that he commanded.

"Maybe we have a chance," he whispered gravely to Dal Reynolds. "The barest, slimmest ghost of a chance."

He took the last velocity chart from its peg.

"There," he said, pointing. "We still have a vestige of our original tangential velocity—the motion imparted to the *Rigel* at take-off by the rotation of the Earth. If we were to land at Tycho, it would have to be eliminated completely." He looked questioningly at Dal. "But if it weren't eliminated?"

Reynolds bit his lip. "We—we'd miss the Moon."

Greg nodded. "Our absolute velocity is still high enough to escape lunar gravity, and we would have a crazy, gyrating, eccentric orbit. For awhile we'd be safe. We could conserve our remaining fuel on the narrow chance that we might make Tycho—if they have the cradles fixed by the time we circle back."

"It'll work!" Dal yelled. "It's got to work!"

Greg shook his head. "Maybe. It depends on the gang at Tycho. If we can't get in there when we circle back, that long elliptic orbit will carry us directly into Earth's fields. We'll be helplessly dragged down."

The voice of Stedman came thinly

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to them through vastness of the void.

"I believe you can do it, Greg! It's a wild, desperate chance, but it should take four or five days. We can repair the cradles by then. I'm positive of that."

Greg Caldwell stared rigidly at nothing.

"One circuit of the Moon. Then safety—or death."

LIKE a streak they passed the Moon with eighty miles to spare —the merest hairline of safety to the hurtling ship. The fantastic, craggy horizon seemed horribly close, the jagged peaks reaching for them like the fangs of some great, starving beast. But they passed it safely and swept onward and upward into the bleak, sunless night of the Moon's shadow.

Through the shadow they would soar and out again, still climbing steeply away into space, the slow arc of their incredibly long, narrow, elliptic path carrying them across the far side of the Moon. They would reach its end, circle and plunge back again with the same eighty miles to spare. Then they might angle safely back into Tycho.

They were still close to the Moon, still receding, when the meteoroid-detector alarm filled the control deck with its clamor.

"Hang on!" cried Dal, bracing himself against the jabbing thrust of the steering rockets.

But it never came. The alarm shrilled on. The light winked its scarlet warning from the control panel. But there was no wash of fire from the tubes, no lurching of the ship as it lunged out of the path of the approaching meteoroid. Startled, the two men stared at each other. Though meteoric bodies of detectable size were rare enough, failure of the fire control was rarer still.

"It must be a body that has almost matched our course and speed," Caldwell said. "Apparently it has just punctured our detector field and hasn't approached close enough for the integrators to start work on it."

Then the radio came to bewildering life.

"An excellent theory, Captain," it purred, "but unfortunately erroneous. Your detector-calculator will reveal that the body has a mass of over a hundred tons, which would be an unusual meteoroid, would it not?"

There was a cold glitter of anticipation in Greg Caldwell's gray eyes.

"Who are you?"

"Your curiosity is frightfully tactless, Captain," the radio answered. "You should familiarize yourself with the Earth Navigation Code, which says in respect to fellow travelers encountered en route. . . ."

"If you're who I think you are," Greg interrupted coldly, "you'll soon be familiar with another set of Earth statutes—the Penal Code."

"Really?" The smooth voice was faintly reproving. "You seem to have foreseen my tactics. But you may have your guess. Just who do you think I am?"

"Northrup." Greg fairly spat out the word.

"Excellent, Captain, excellent." Northrup's voice chilled a little. "Now let us see, Captain, if you are as clever at navigation as you are at guessing visitors. The 'meteor' that punctured your detector's fields is my ship, a most spaceworthy craft and well armed. Now, Captain, start your rockets and begin driving at one and one-eighth gravities. I will match velocity with you in order to effect a transfer of personnel."

Dal Reynolds made a furious, incoherent sound, but Greg motioned him to silence and proceeded to answer.

"And if I refuse?"

Northrup chuckled. "That would be a lamentable error on your part. We have several weapons with us, and I must say the ports of your ship glistening in the Sun make excellent targets."

"The devil!" raved Dal Reynolds. "The heartless devil! He'd do it, too!"

"Well, Captain?" came Northrup's ingratiating voice.

"I'll do it. But we have little fuel left for maneuvering."

"You won't need it," replied Nor-

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thrup cheerfully. "Now, let us begin. . . ."

Three space-suited figures swung like bloated rag dolls in the void. They approached the *Rigel* with maddening deliberation.

"If we could turn," whispered Dal, "we could catch them in the jets."

Greg shook his head. "They're too scattered. We couldn't get them all, and one might get back to their ship. They'd chase us then. They have weapons. And our fuel—"

The clank of grapples sounded, followed by Northrup's voice, tinny in his suit radio.

"The lock, Captain."

Numbly Caldwell spun the combination. He shook his head stubbornly as Dal Reynolds flung him a beseeching look. The young co-pilot was itching to break the guns out of the equipment closet, to prepare an ambush.

"No violence, Caldwell," came Northrup's deadly whisper, backed by the clang of boots against the lock's metal floor. He stepped through the door, flanked closely by his two men. "Watch them carefully."

Then, while they guarded Dal and Greg alertly, Northrup removed his suit-helmet and placed it nonchalantly on an instrument shelf.

"There," he sighed, rubbing his big, gauntleted hands together in satisfaction. He bowed slightly toward Greg. "You're Caldwell. Charmed, I'm sure."

"I'm nauseated," said Dal Reynolds clearly.

Northrup's big body turned slowly, and his black eyebrows raised.

"Well, well," he said. "It's the famous Dallas Reynolds, space chef *extraordinaire*. My, my, this is pleasant. Have you finished that cookbook yet?"

He guffawed heartily at this, and Dal said various things until Greg interrupted.

"Shut up, Dal. Let's not fool around. What do you want, Northrup?"

The big scientist beamed. "A man of action. We should get along excellently." He dropped his genial pose and snapped suddenly: "You have an atomic power unit on this ship, haven't you, Caldwell?"

"You know I have," Greg answered coldly.

"I want it, Caldwell. I'm going to take it."

"Not if I can stop you," promised Greg, his lips whitening.

Dal took a truculent stride forward.

"Why, you fat old—"

"No, Dal!" ordered Caldwell.

The big, gleaming guns of Northrup's men had swung to ready.

"I am going to take it," repeated Northrup. "I need it at my observatory. That fool Hartridge can send another up to Tycho. He has plenty of them. Knowing your fuel limitations, I had thought that by wrecking the Tycho cradles I could force you to land at Tranquilitatis. That you would risk such a suicidal venture as you did never occurred to me. Let me urge you to risk no more such ventures."

HIS pressure suit crackled as he stretched and sat down.

"I suppose, Caldwell," he said with an evil grin, "you'd like to know how I discovered your schedule. I may as well tell you the whole thing. Being the methodical fellow you are, you'll appreciate my genius."

Unsealing his gauntlets, he drew them off and continued.

"In the first place, Tranquilitatis is not an observatory at all. It is a fortress, housing a science that can utterly dominate the Earth-Moon system—with one provision. I must have atomic power to drive my deflection fields. They are heavy, Captain, far heavier than is necessary to turn even the largest meteoroid. Frankly, they are designed as protection against heavy shells and bombs." He drummed on the taut fabric of his space-suit with beefy fingers.

"As for your schedule, Hartridge himself explained that to my men. The fact that he told all and forgot completely that he told it, is an excellent criterion of the forces that I command. Everything I have done merely proves again that genius works at its best in quiet and solitude."

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"I think you have greatly overestimated your genius, Northrup," said Greg quietly.

Northrup blinked slyly. "Is that an oblique way of suggesting that I am mad, Captain?"

"Mad?" snorted Dal, unable to maintain further silence. "He's stark, staring, raving, frothing mad." He turned to the two spacemen. "He'll turn on you guys sometime. Why don't you—"

"Really, Mr. Reynolds, you're wasting your time," Northrup interrupted mildly. "You see, these men have forgotten how to talk."

Dal was speechless with slowly dawning horror.

"More of your 'science,' eh?" Greg said.

"Yes, Captain. You might say that, I suppose." His sharp gaze slid cunningly back to Dal. "Perhaps this little negotiation would be more clubby if we had a bit of coffee?"

"Aren't you getting just a little banal?" grated Greg contemptuously.

Northrup waved his gun airily.

"Make certain, Captain," he warned cheerfully, "that you don't get just a little dead. Now I'll wager that you brew an excellent pot of coffee, Mr. Reynolds."

"I have one recipe I'd like you to try," Dal cracked recklessly. "It's made with strychnin."

But Northrup only laughed tolerantly.

"We'll try the old-fashioned style today," he said. "Strong, without sugar. Now if you will lead the way to the galley, Mr. Reynolds, these two can handle the captain, I'm sure."

NORTHRUP settled himself as comfortably as he could on a galley chair. His space-suit encumbered him somewhat, and he grumbled as he tried to subdue its stiffly stubborn folds.

"I'm working on a new skin-tight space-suit, Mr. Reynolds. It will be far more practical than the usual type. Unfortunate that I haven't had more time to work on it, eh?"

"Yeah," said Dal Reynolds absently. "Very unfortunate."

He was watching the galley heating unit, which glowed darkly red under the sauce pan of water. Swiftly it grew hotter, and bubbles formed on the pan's bottom. And slowly Dal Reynolds' eyes grew larger as the germ of an idea clawed at his consciousness.

Whistling carelessly, he slid open the supply chest. Under the pretense of hunting for coffee, he edged nearer the galley door. Northrup watched him warily for a moment, then relaxed enough to ease his unwieldy bulk once more on the small chair.

Dal Reynolds streaked away like a slender, scared ghost. He gained the corridor and slammed the door. Panting he twisted the handle backward until he heard the faint click of the lock snapping home. He heard Northrup roaring like a mad bull inside. And then he heard another shrill, menacing sound.

He felt a sweeping wave of heat. Paralyzed, he saw the galley door glowing a dull red! Did this mad Northrup possess a hand-weapon that would melt cuproberyl?

Dal leaped down the corridor to the intra-deck rail, slid down it like a desperate fireman. He landed on the fuel deck, and that was where Dal Reynolds wanted most ardently to be.

He reached a manual control valve, spun it recklessly. The thunder of power faded and coughed out, and there came the weird, unmistakable sensation of free fall.

For a moment Dal hung there weightless. Then, muttering a prayer for Greg Caldwell in the control room, he spun the valve open once more. The rockets roared and belched fire again. Again there was gravity that would keep a man's feet securely on the floor.

Dal's feet were racing, carrying him swiftly back up the ladder toward the galley, where he heard Northrup still raging. But this time Northrup's roars were of frustration and agony. The galley door was still smoking hot, but the weapon's shrill snarl had stopped.

Dal kicked the door open. Inside, Northrup staggered in circles, his arms over his eyes. His face was

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blotched and mottled where scalding globules of suddenly weightless water had drenched him.

From where the big scientist had dropped it, Dal picked the glittering, deadly gun. Pointing it at the floor, he snapped its trigger. Fire poured from its muzzle and the floor was suddenly slick with softly flowing metal.

"Good enough," he muttered. "Get into the corridor—quick!"

Groaning, the big man stumbled blindly to obey.

"You may be hot stuff as a scientist," Dal jeered triumphantly, "but you can learn a few things in a galley, too. I'll bet you never saw a pan of water start acting up when a ship went into free fall."

ROUGHLY he guided Northrup's hand to the ladder rungs.

"Crawl up there, and don't say a word or make a funny move. This gun of yours has a beautiful effect."

Panting in his clumsy suit, Northrup struggled upward.

"And climb out," Dal whispered savagely, "with your back to those cronies of yours, so they can't see that your face looks like a steak."

Northrup was moaning with pain, but he did as he was told. His mad brain was working, though. At the last step, a metal-shod foot kicked treacherously. Northrup leaped with sudden, amazing agility out of Dal's sight to the opposite side of the control room.

"Take them!" his great voice bellowed insanely. "Shoot, you fools!"

Dal Reynolds dizzily raised his arm and aimed over the edge of the deck-hatch. Greg Caldwell saw. Lithely he leaped and grappled.

Dal and the men fired at once. He felt a sickening impact, as though something of enormous, resistless weight had struck him. But he knew it was the power of that incredible weapon. He saw a lock of hair hanging before his eyes shrivel in a split instant of time. Then he had fallen, half-conscious, below the level of the control deck.

But he was hanging on still, he realized dimly. He was hanging on with scorched fingers, while searing currents of super-heated air whirled and eddied about him. And someone was prying his desperate grip loose, lifting him. Against the muffled drum of racing rocket blasts he heard thermo-stats clicking, felt a cool, refreshing draft. Dazedly he tried to sit up.

Greg Caldwell grinned down at him unsteadily.

"You got that villain, boy. And that pot-shot he took at you got his boss."

Dal twisted, staring, but Greg turned him back again.

"I wouldn't look now," he said. "He's pretty much of a mess. As soon as I truss up this other chap, I'll put the remains in storage. Then we'll plot a decent orbit for this wagon to get a certain ato-unit safely into Ty-ho."

Things were going around and around again, Dal noticed. But he struggled to talk.

"Cut those rockets," he instructed blearily. "Won't have fuel."

"Don't worry, old-timer," Greg assured him. "There's another ship purring along beside us on her auto-pilot. She's full of fuel and we've got lots of time to stock up."

Time and the stars were not behaving right. Dal felt oddly hungry. And when a man was hungry, the thing to do was to eat.

"How about some sandwiches?" he mumbled.

"Sure, sure," agreed Greg Caldwell gently. "You just sleep now. When you wake up, you can fool around in the galley all you want."

That sounded swell to Dal Reynolds.

"I'll make a nice cup custard for dessert, huh?" he said with a dazedly idiotic grin.

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THE PURPLE BAT

By RICHARD WILSON

Author of "Murder from Mars," "Transitory Island," etc.

The motor roared as it shot across the grounds toward Janet and Dan

Dan Ross Could Sell Warming Pads on Mercury's Day Side, But He Couldn't Talk Himself Out of Hot Water on Mars!

THE bronze-colored space boat, moored with mathematical precision a mile above Mars' surface, bore a startling array of impertinent signs, resembling a college student's room.

The other way to Niagara Falls,
Piccadilly Circus
North Pole and Points Tellurian

NO RIDERS

Keep off the Brass

Daniel Ross, sole Martian representative for the most spectacular and least salable miniature television set in the Solar System, circled the curiosity in his little rocket-flier. Squinting as the afternoon sunlight glinted off the ship's gleaming surface, he grinned. He had deliberately taken a line of Wright-Tomson wrist television sets, just to prove he was the best traveling salesman in the Universe. The fact that he would get a

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quarter interest in the business if he saved it from bankruptcy was only an added inducement, of course.

"They must be lonesome in there, with all these warnings around," he muttered lightly, a trick he had picked up on the space-road's long, empty distances. "Put your foot firmly in the door, Ross. Smile and give 'em the old oil."

The traveling salesman cut the tiny ship's power, switched on the magnetic grapple. He stepped onto the little platform that was under the door, pressed a button labeled "Out to Lunch" and was surprised to find that the huge circular door was ajar. This was highly irregular. Such doors, on the space houses that had become the vogue during the past year, usually opened to him only after a great hissing of valves and rumbling of motors, if at all.

He pulled the door open and stepped inside, finding himself in a tiny air-lock. Beyond was a large and comfortably furnished room. At a desk in the corner sat a brown-haired girl, her back toward him.

"I beg your pardon," said Daniel Ross.

"Hello," replied the girl without turning her head. "We don't want any. Good-by."

Ross took this in stride. A super-salesman of the twenty-first century must be equal to almost any situation.

"If you'll give me the opportunity to demonstrate my product," he said, "I'm sure we'll both be well rewarded. I'm working—"

"Your way through prep school. I know. And don't forget the aged parents of whom you're the sole support. Your line is older than Mars."

THE girl turned. She wore a blue dress, with shoes to match. Her full red lips were curved in a little smile. Ross drew himself up.

"I was about to say," he remarked coldly, "that I am working in conjunction with the Wright-Tomson Company to promote the sale of their wrist television sets. This new departure in radio has been made poss—"

The girl whirled, opened a desk drawer and flung papers into the air.

"At last!" she cried. "Now I can tell the Wright-Wrongson people what I think of them. Here." She offered him a watch-shaped object, holding it gingerly by a strap between thumb and forefinger. "Be careful, it might go off."

"Ah!" observed Ross. "Last year's model. But as good as new, I'll warrant, and still giving excellent service, eh?"

"Good as new, my foot!" said the girl acidly. "If I turn it on while I'm wearing it, my arm goes numb up to the elbow and little blue sparks hop off the ends of my fingernails."

"Shocking," murmured Ross. "Perhaps we can find out what's wrong with it."

He flicked over a tiny lever. The little screen of the instrument darkened. Microscopic, misty figures wavered, took form. A blast of music out of all proportion to the size of the receiver smote their ears. Ross tuned in another station.

"Another thrilling episode in the career of the Purple Bat." The announcer stepped back. His place on the color-reproducing screen was taken by a weird figure in a cape and eye-slitted hood of dark purple. Extending above the shoulders were huge purple wings.

"When we left you yesterday," the eerie figure was saying, "I was aboard the pirate ship, being pursued by three subhuman monsters armed with disintegrators. As I reached the end of the corridor—"

"Kid stuff," said Ross, reaching for the dial.

"Wait!" breathed the girl.

The voice had stopped abruptly, although the figure could still be seen on the screen. A crackling, mingled with low shrieks, came from the little machine, then died away. A new voice filled the air.

"Janet Vickers, listen carefully!

The girl started, her eyes widening with fright. Ross looked quizzically at her. She nodded, bent to the tiny screen.

"I've called to inform you that I've kidnaped your father," the voice rasped.

Furtively Ross took a dial-studded

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instrument board from his kit. He set it up, twisting the dials, trying to locate the origin of the phantom voice.

"Who are you?" demanded Janet. "What does all this mean?"

"It means— None of that, Mr. Ross!" There was a loud explosion as the instrument panel was blown to bits. The voice continued imperturbably. "I need your father for some profitable and utterly unlawful schemes of mine. Do nothing so foolish as informing the authorities, otherwise your father might meet with a fatal accident. As for my name, suppose you call me the Purple Bat. Melodramatic, perhaps, but more euphonious than my own. Set the dials of your clumsy space boat due north. I will take care of the rest. Don't get any heroic ideas, Mr. Ross. Stick to your peddling. Now, my friends, I return you to our regular program."

There was silence for a moment. Then the voice of the original Purple Bat broke in.

"Stand quietly, Gregory Masters, or I'll blast you from the face of Saturn—"

Grunting disgustedly, Ross switched off the set. Janet Vickers sat as if dazed, then got to her feet, kicking over the chair. Ross recoiled at the wild expression in her eyes.

"Oh, the beast!" she screamed. "The cowardly, sneaking dog! You can't take my father away from me!"

ROSS ducked an inkwell that came his way. A heavy notebook knocked a large model tesseract from its stand. A paperweight flew through the air and shattered a picture on the wall.

Janet suddenly stopped weeping. She adjusted her hair and looked around to see Ross crawl from the shelter of an armchair. She was smiling.

"Frankly," said Ross, "I don't get it."

"An act," she explained. She walked to the picture that lay shattered on the floor. From among the pieces of broken glass she extracted a tiny silver box, smashed out of shape. She held it out to him.

"Now do you understand?" she asked.

"Wireless dictaphone?" he blurted, puzzled.

"Also television transmitter, made of radite, infinitesimally small. Its rays are capable of penetrating thirty inches of solid matter. The half-inch picture was a cinch."

"Talking to you is like reading an encyclopedia," marveled Ross. "In other words, old Bats could see and hear what was going on in this room till you smashed his gadget by throwing a fit."

"It was a paperweight," she corrected.

"It was a good idea," said Ross. "Well, do we go look for your father?"

"We? You're just a stranger, a traveling salesman."

"Yeah, but with an adventurous soul. Let's take my business ship."

"Should we?" she asked worriedly. "He said to use my big space boat."

"Mine's faster and more maneuverable."

She nodded thoughtfully. "First let me switch on the automatic ventilator." She jabbed a button on the wall. A second later a light above it glowed red, then faded. She smiled at him. "Let's go."

They got into his light, swift ship and he set the controls due north. Immediately they sped into the air. High over the squat, sprawling but well constructed buildings of the capital of the state of Tuloni-Lugana. They headed involuntarily for the open, sandy country known as the Wastes of Odern, which stretched almost immeasurably between them and the next big city, Iopa.

Half an hour later Janet nudged him in the ribs and pointed ahead. There was a rambling series of buildings, one standing out among the others, all surrounded by a high gray wall. Ross tried to nod. Instead his head snapped back as the little two-seater tossed about crazily amid a lot of loud explosions.

"Are we being shot at?" Janet cried.

"No," Ross declared sadly as the ship began to glide silently toward the ground. "Motor trouble. I can't imagine why. She's just been overhauled."

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"How about the emergency propeller?"

"That's on the blink, too. Hold tight. We'll be down before you know it."

"That's what I'm afraid of," she quavered.

Ross pulled up the ship's nose. The wheels touched the ground, rolled to a stop a quarter-mile from the settlement. As the two stepped out of the ship, a gate in the wall opened. A powerful, bullet-nosed diesel car sped toward them.

THREE people emerged from the car. One was a slight man with watery blue eyes. His black hair was sparse, plastered flat on his skull. A steel-colored shirt, open at the neck, matched his shorts. A Raevak gun was holstered at his thigh.

The second was a grotesque figure about four feet tall. He had a tetrahedral head, blinking shoe-button eyes, a wide single-nostriled nose. An oval mouth that would not close completely showed gleaming white teeth. He had an egg-shaped, hair-covered body, with powerful legs. Naturally accustomed to traveling on four legs, this specimen seemed to be taking pains to walk erect. He moved awkwardly, ill at ease.

The third was a tall man in his late forties. Dressed like his human companion, but unarmed, he wore blue-lensed glasses that seemed to possess a hypnotic quality. Both Ross and Janet were unable to discern any part of his face. Their eyes were attracted involuntarily to the blue spectacles, though they could look elsewhere without difficulty.

"Welcome to Ostend's Outpost," the tall man said, leaning forward near-sightedly. His voice was brittle, metallic. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"Motor trouble," said Ross. "If we could borrow a mechanic—"

"Of course. Permit us to introduce ourselves. This is Francis Spork, my colleague. I am Leo Ostend. This is Number Six, an experimental Martian—a Parrag, or artificial mutant. The other five were unsuccessful. Greet the folks, Six."

The Martian looked at him with frightened eyes. He turned to the newcomers, his voice rumbling thickly.

"How . . . do."

"A Martian?" gasped Ross. "I thought all native Martians were immense green things with spiny hair, practically extinct."

"You're thinking of the lamiae, or the greenies," explained Ostend. They're practically nonexistent today. They were cleaned up about fifty years ago by the Tellurian army of maintenance. Six is of another species."

"How do," the little Parrag insisted.

"How do you do," said Ross politely. "This is Miss Janet Vickers. My name is Daniel Ross."

"Happy to know you." The owner of the blue spectacles bowed. "Suppose we go inside."

The car pulled up in front of a large, two-story stone building, one of many inside the wall. Ostend conducted his guests into the building. The three found themselves in a room that might have been a hotel lobby.

"Please make yourselves at home," urged their host. "You will find here magazines, cigarettes and a television set. I'll go find my mechanic."

Janet turned to the System's best traveling salesman.

"Nice fellow, Ostend—on the surface."

"Bit eccentric, though. Why a town out here? Did you notice his eyes?"

"No," replied Janet. "I can't remember his face at all. Do you think he's the bird we're after?"

"He's a fine-looking suspect," said Ross.

"Did you notice that gigantic building we passed?"

"Notice?" he blurted. "Didn't that fellow Spork almost ram it? Looked like a hangar."

"Uh-huh. Assuming that Ostend is our quarry, what are we going to do about it? We might spend the night here, but if he's the fellow we're after, I hardly think he'd be anxious to have any guests poking their noses into his business."

Ostend reappeared, waving a cigarette holder.

"Unfortunately," he announced,

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"your ship won't be ready as soon as I'd expected. My mechanic tells me that never has he seen a motor in such condition. It's a mass of rust!"

OSTEND lighted a cigarette. It was an eerie sight. The holder, in the circle of bluish radiance that emanated from the spectacles, became invisible. Only the cigarette was to be seen, apparently floating in the air.

"*Must* you do that?" cried Janet, looking away.

"Sorry," apologized Ostend. He threw away the cigarette, pocketed the holder. "Sometimes I forget. You see, my eyes were injured in an explosion years ago. As a result I am nearly blind. The glass of these spectacles is the only kind powerful enough to enable me to see at all, so I am forced to accept its other properties." Ostend bowed. "Now, since your ship cannot possibly be in running condition until tomorrow, I am pleased to offer you accommodations for the night."

They walked over sandy ground toward another stone building. The Martian night was falling. Lights glowed over the Outpost. Ostend rolled back a folding door. The ground floor, scattered with sawdust and excelsior, served as a warehouse. Crates and boxes were piled about, some empty, some still unopened.

Their rooms upstairs were comfortable and tastefully furnished, the windows overlooking an enclosed court. Ostend begged to be excused, promising to send supper up shortly.

"What do you make of that mechanic's diagnosis?" asked Ross. "How could my ship's motor be a mass of rust?"

"Maybe Ostend shot us down with a rust ray. The Purple Bat told us to take my boat. He might have got angry at being disobeyed and shot us down, at the same time wrecking the motor."

Ross swallowed hard. His respect for the enemy suddenly grew overwhelming.

Their doors were locked from the outside. They discovered that when Six left, after bringing their supper. They had tried to pump the Parrag about Ostend, but were unsuccessful. If Six knew anything, he wasn't talking.

They peered out the window. They were only on the second floor yet, the drop to the stone court would be risky. Ross went first. He hung by his hands a second, then dropped. Though he landed on the balls of his feet, the jar was distinctly unpleasant.

He motioned Janet to be patient a moment and disappeared through a doorway. He returned with his arms full of excelsior, which he piled under the window. Janet jumped, landing lightly.

"Where now?" she asked.

"There ought to be something interesting in that granddaddy of all hangars."

Cautiously they entered the hangar through a door that was unlocked. They stood amazed for a moment after entering, staring upward. Illuminated by a score of dim lights high on the ceiling were a hundred or more three-man rocket fighters. They were standing on the floor, or supported by hooks from the ceiling. Presumably they could be lowered to the floor, ready to dart out on their mission of death when the others were out of the way.

"Quite an armada," breathed Janet. "What's he going to do with it?"

Rose shrugged. "Maybe he's incorporated as a fighter factory."

"Very logical. I suppose manufacturers' trademarks always go on their ships in letters a foot high?"

She pointed at the side of the nearest craft. Ross made out the words "Leo I" and a coat-of-arms of outré design. The insignia was repeated on each of the other ships.

"Now that you mention it," said Ross, "it does look a bit suspicious."

They made their way to the opposite side of the enclosure. A hundred feet inward was another, smaller wall, from behind which came noise and light. Soon they could distinguish the tramp of marching feet, strangely muffled, a shrill voice giving orders, an occasional bark of command from a voice they suspected was Ostend's.

They peered through an opening in the rock wall. A fantastic scene met their eyes. Batteries of searchlights

[*Turn to page 114*]

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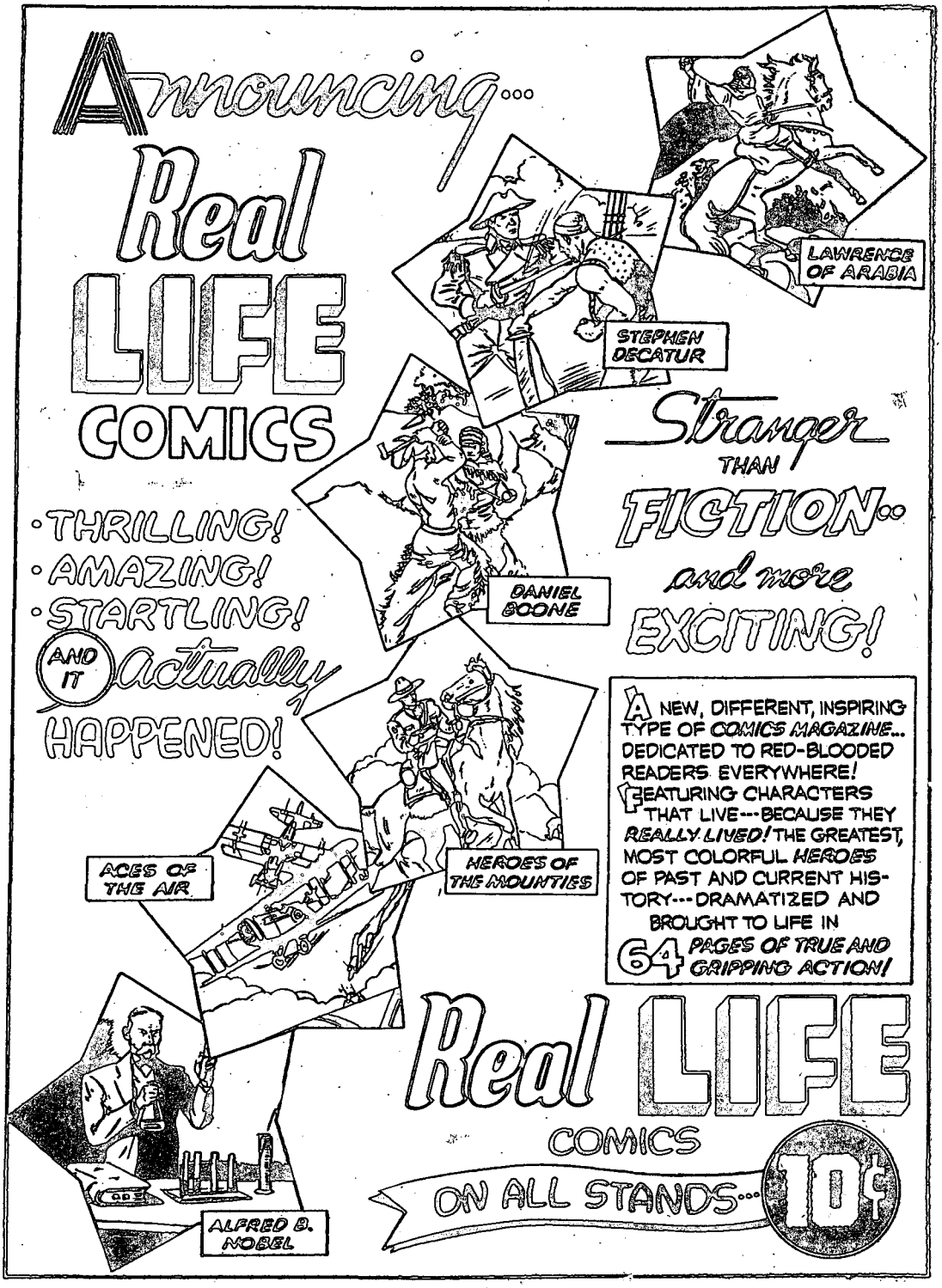

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atop the walls lighted the enclosure as if it were day. Two hundred Martians, carrying Raevak rifles, were going through the intricate maneuvers of military drill. Giving orders in his native tongue was Six, the Parrag who had brought their supper.

A THRONELIKE chair bore Leo Ostend, self-termed monarch of Ostend's Outpost. Now and again he beckoned to Six, who hurried over and listened attentively, then gave new orders to his troops. On the wall above Ostend were the first other Tellurians Janet and Ross had seen. There were half a dozen directly under the searchlights, each squatting behind a Raevak rapid-fire. Evidently Ostend was taking no chances of revolt in his army.

A Sonoprobe, a massive tangle of outstretched steel ears, strained electrically to catch the sound of aircraft. The operator, his back toward them, a headpiece down over his ears, might have been either a Martian or a Tellurian. As they watched, the operator raised a hand. Immediately every light in Ostend's Outpost went out. Before their eyes could readjust themselves to the darkness, one blinding searchlight stabbed out. Ross and Janet were caught in its beam.

Ostend's voice barked orders in the tongue Six had spoken. A handful of Parrag soldiers stepped out of the darkness, surrounded the two, threatened them with rifles. Urged along the wall and through an archway, Janet and Ross were brought before Ostend. The other searchlight snapped on. Spork smiled evilly and rested his hand on the holstered gun.

"So," said Ostend, peering at them near-sightedly, "you couldn't wait until tomorrow to make a tour of inspection. That is unfortunate. Since your curiosity is so acute, I have no recourse but to satisfy it. First tell me what you already know."

"Not much," replied Ross, looking bitterly at his captor. "We know that you've made slaves of the Parrags. We've seen your hangar. No doubt with your planes and Parrags you plan to overthrow the government of Tuloni—"

"With the help of my father, Monroe Vickers," broke in Janet, "which you won't get."

"So you know that, too, eh? Worthy opponents, I must admit."

"You're not so badly equipped, yourself," Ross said ironically, glancing at the men behind the rapid-fires and the bewildered but armed Parrags.

Ostend barked an order. Their Parrag captors dropped back.

"I won't interrupt your tour," continued Ostend. "Just to be sure you don't miss anything, I'll accompany you. So will Francis, if you don't mind. I find him invaluable at times."

Spork grinned, patted his gun and followed Ostend as he led the way across the enclosure. At Ostend's command, the Parrags broke ranks and scurried off.

"I am happy to report," said Ostend, "that your father is in the best of health. You shall see for yourself in a moment. Since you know so much already, it will do no harm to tell you the rest. There is about to be a change of power in Tuloni. I believe that a benevolent dictator will be more acceptable to the masses than the so-called democratic but wholly corrupt leaders now in office. It is therefore my intention to take over the government in the near future. Francis will be my chief aide. Don't you think he'll make a good governor, Mr. Ross?"

"Lovely," replied Ross, looking distastefully at Spork. "Just lovely."

"I have been putting my plans into action at a great rate. My first step was to hush up my discovery of the Parrags. Few people outside scientific circles have heard of them and no one seemed to mind when I assumed responsibility for them. The Parrags are a highly developed race of near-human animals. Six, whom you have met, is the best-developed among them. I wasted much valuable time on his five antecedents, who were hopelessly stupid. Six, however, is the perfect pupil."

Ostend's voice dropped to a whisper.

"He is as intelligent, I dare say, as Francis. So far as I know, he speaks more English. Would you be-

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lieve that in all the years I've known Francis, I doubt if he's spoken a hundred words? About eighty of these were 'yes' and 'no'."

"You don't tell me," remarked Ross.

"I do," Ostend went on confidentially. "I met Francis in Iopa a good many years ago, at a bar. Of course the place is quite respectable now—"

"I hate to be a wet blanket, boys," broke in Janet, "but aren't you straying from the topic? You were telling us about your plan of conquest, Mr. Ostend."

"So I was. Let me see. I made a very encouraging discovery about that time. I found the Parrags lived in a crystal mine. Do you know what that means?"

"Crystals—water," said Janet. "Water—on Mars—money. Money—power. Is that it?"

"You have the analytical mind, Miss Vickers. I am nominal chairman of the board of Martian Life, Inc. So, with funds coming in from every part of the globe, it was only a matter of time before I built a rather formidable army, constructing my own ships and guns here at the Outpost. My only difficulty lay in getting munitions. That provided a nearly insurmountable barrier, inasmuch as all Martian munitions factories are government-owned. A private consumer cannot purchase any of their supply without undergoing the most searching investigation.

"In my position you can understand that an investigation of our Outpost would be highly undesirable. Therefore things looked rather black, until your father happened to stumble upon Vixon. Incidentally Vixon is a very appropriate name for the explosive. Did you name it, Miss Vickers, or was it named after you?"

"That's quite clever, Mr. Ostend," said Janet patronizingly.

"Thank you. I have learned through the use of a mechanical spy or two that Vixon is smokeless, highly explosive and amazingly inexpensive to manufacture. Its production, I understand, is simplicity itself. I have everything I need, except the formula. Vickers is a very cautious man. He doesn't write things down on paper. He keeps them in his head, where I can't get at them without a lot of bother. Hence I resorted to abduction."

THEY had arrived at a building made, as was everything in the town except the hangar, of gray stone.

"This is your father's house," said Ostend to Janet. "Since his only recreation is working in his laboratory, I have placed at his disposal a completely equipped one. I thought he'd go ahead with his experiments—not on the explosives, for I didn't expect that much—perhaps evolving something that might prove useful to me in a field other than that of revolution.

"But your father is cleverer still. He spends all his time in elementary chemical experiments. He seems to be perfectly happy changing red litmus paper to blue, breaking down my expensive water to its component parts, and so on."

Ostend led them into the building. A faint but unpleasant odor smote their nostrils.

"What's that?" Janet asked.

Ostend laughed. "Another of your father's experiments. When he first arrived, I used to visit him and try to bribe him into sharing his secret with me. He refused. Evidently he became annoyed at my visits, because the next time I came he poured a quart of sulphuric acid into a pot of zinc. He'd provided himself with a gas-mask, but I hadn't. The place hasn't been the same since."

"Good old Dad," approved Janet.

"Another time he set up a miniature distillery. You'll find dozens of bottles lining the laboratory shelves, full of alcoholic distillate. Number Four, one of my Parrag failures, helped himself to some. He ran wild, smashing considerable machinery." Ostend chuckled. "We had to shoot him. Well, enough of this gay banter. This is the only room in the house denied your father. I use it for observation. When I flick a switch, this mirror becomes transparent in only one direction. There. Your father is perfectly safe and still playing, I see."

They saw a white-haired, pleasantly round man of fifty, attired in a white

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smock. He was engaged in watching tiny sodium-powered boats boil around and around in a trough of water.

"That's Dad," said Janet. "Always clowning."

Ostend's voice hardened. "The farce is over. Let the tragedy begin. Francis!"

Spork drew his Raevak pistol, leveled it at the girl.

"Don't do anything heroic while I'm tying you, Mr. Ross. Someone might die."

Ross wisely did nothing that might further endanger the girl's life. When the traveling salesman had been securely tied, Ostend pressed the switch, making the glass transparent in both directions. The man in the white smock looked up and gave a start of surprise.

"Janet!" he cried. "What are you doing here?"

"Being held hostage, Dad," quavered the girl, for the first time seeming to realize that she was in danger.

"Now, Professor," warned Ostend, "unless you give me the formula I want, your daughter dies. That, I think, would be pretty terrible."

"So would be deaths of thousands of innocent people. I can guess how you'd use the formula, once it was in your hands."

"Don't give it to him, Dad," Janet insisted. "Never mind me."

"Professor!" Ross broke in. "Don't listen to her. You couldn't watch your daughter die. I couldn't anyhow."

Vickers looked at each of them in turn.

"All right, Ostend," he sighed. "Give me half an hour to put the formula on paper."

"Fine." Ostend beamed as he untied Ross. "Come, children, back to jail. This time it will be a real one."

The cell-block was dark, below ground and windowless. Ross nervously paced his cell, thinking furiously but futilely. A welt on his forehead testified that he had not been incarcerated without a struggle. In the adjoining cell, Janet sat moodily on a cot and stared unseeingly at the floor. They had been there almost two hours.

Ross ceased his pacing when he heard a pad of footsteps. The sound came from the right. Spork, who had been stationed on guard, was to their left. A Parrag appeared in the dimly lit corridor.

"Six!" breathed Janet and Ross in unison.

The little Martian motioned them to silence. He produced a key, unlocked their doors, handed Ross a Raevak pistol.

"Follow me. Don't make any noise."

The Earth people silently followed the Martian down the corridor, their minds full of unspoken questions. They climbed to the first floor of the building.

"There is only one door," said Six. "Spork is guarding it. He'll have to be overcome first. This way."

A dark room led into a hall. At the end of it Spork could be seen, his back toward them, sitting in a chair tilted against the wall. Ross crept on, his gun ready. Spork looked up as Ross' shoe scuffed against the hard floor.

"Hey!" he shouted, springing to his feet.

"Shut up!" gritted Ross.

He slammed a hard right to the jaw. Spork folded up with a groan.

FIVE hundred feet away was the building where Professor Vickers was being held prisoner. They hurried toward it, crouching, taking advantage of every shadow. Through a window Ross saw Vickers and Ostend talking.

They burst in. Ostend looked around to find himself covered by three guns. If he was surprised, he didn't show it. He bowed ironically.

"You people *do* pop up, don't you? And you, Six. Why should you aim a gun at me? Surely you owe me an explanation, if nothing else."

"You shall have your explanation," declared the Parrag. "Before you came, my people were happy. You decided to teach us man's culture, never thinking we had our own. Having been a peace-loving folk for centuries, my people were content to let matters take their course, as long as you threatened us no harm. We didn't mind working in your crystal mine.

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We were decently treated there. But when this talk of war began, we became uneasy.

"It's not our wish to wage war on innocent people to pave the way to kingship for you, nor is it our way to let wrong go unpunished. When you shot Vicla, whom you facetiously called Number Four, my people became angry. It was only with difficulty that I persuaded them to bide their time. Now, I think, the time has come."

Ostend's face, hidden behind the blue haze of his spectacles, could betray no visible amazement at the miraculous transformation of a dull, half-human creature to one intelligent and well spoken. His surprise could be heard in his voice, however.

"What brought about this change in you, Six?"

"My name is Orro," said the Martian. He stood straight, princely. There was pride in his eyes. "Before you came, I was a leader of my people. A council of the elders decided that since you were to train us in the ways of human beings at no cost to us save loss of dignity, we would fall in with your plan. When you further decided to pass out higher educations to a few of us, we took full advantage of it. While you thought we were puzzling over elementary grammar, though, we were learning from Euclid, Caesar, Shakespeare."

"Yes?" snarled a voice behind them. "Drop 'em."

Spork stood triumphantly holding a Raevak. With no choice but to obey, Ross, Janet and Orro dropped their guns.

"Now," said Ostend amiably, "where were we? As I was telling your father, Miss Vickers, we are not easily fooled. The professor thought that by giving us only half the formula, we wouldn't be able to tell the difference long enough for something to intervene. But my able technicians weren't misled." Ostend held out his hand to Professor Vickers. "The rest, please."

The professor looked at him sourly.

"You'll never get it from me, Ostend."

"Because he doesn't know it," taunted Janet. "Dad and I worked on that problem together. We each memorized half the formula, then destroyed the notes. Only I can help you now, Leo the First—and I won't!"

"Janet," murmured Dan sadly.

"So," purred Ostend, "you have the rest. Give it to me!"

"You," said Janet coolly, "know where you can go."

"If you don't," replied Ostend, "I shall be forced to have Francis shoot your beloved father. None of us would like that."

"Go ahead and shoot!" cried Janet, laughing wildly. "Go ahead!"

Spork's mouth twisted. His finger tightened on the trigger.

"Wait," Ostend ordered.

He was too late. A sharp report, a wisp of smoke came from the Raevak in Spork's hand. Vickers stiffened, a look of surprise on his face. Then he pitched to the floor.

ROSS leaped. Spork swung his gun around, but not in time. While they struggled for one gun, Ostend stooped to recover another from the floor. But Orro, the Parrag, was quicker. Ostend felt himself grabbed by the back of the neck and thrown to the floor. Orro gathered up the Raevaks.

Ostend shrieked. Spork glanced around. Off guard, he was caught on the side of the jaw by Dan's crashing fist. He slumped down, unconscious.

"This is getting monotonous," said Ross.

He looked down to see Ostend groveling blindly on the floor, his glasses shattered into countless fragments of blue. The face, revealed for the first time, was a mass of hideous scar tissue. Janet looked away, suddenly faint. Ross gritted his teeth, revolted by her callousness. She seemed to be more upset by Ostend's appearance than by the death of her father.

"Dan!" she cried. "Don't act like that. I can explain."

But there was no time for explanations. Ostend, in his gropings, had found what he was searching for. His fingers pressed an alarm button. A siren moaned, then screamed. Men

(Continued on page 126)

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FLASH! Science has a new value for the speed of light!

Measuring the speed of light has been a favorite scientific activity for years. Now Dr. Wilmer C. Anderson, using a photo-electric cell, automatic recording devices—and mirrors!—has placed the new value at 186,272 miles per second, which may still be 8.7 miles per second in error.

This is 12 miles per second less than the value previously established. Dr. Anderson made his determinations while at the Cruft Laboratory of Harvard University. And his calculations stand—until the next light-trapper comes along!

THE PROXY PERISCOPE

Science is revolutionizing methods of warfare!

Submarines no longer need hug the surface of the water to search for prey. A new television periscope which submarines use enables the navigators of such vessels to scan the horizon, without the submarine itself being forced to float near the surface where it may be detected by airplane scouts.

This new electronic periscope uses a small floating television camera, connected by cables fed out from the submarine, which itself may then sink to a depth of 150 to 200 feet. Through the cables and television eye which has a revolving motor, the submarine commander can look around the horizon at will while he and his U-boat are safely covered by many feet of water.

FOOD FOR THE FUTURE

Man of tomorrow will use electricity to win him his meals!

Artificial production of food by electricity in future eras is predicted by Dr. Colin G. Fink, head of the division of electrochemistry at Columbia University.

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The little plane, with its deadly load, but carrying no men, is thus made to crash on its target. To avoid interference with its radio controls, the little plane is so shielded that only impulses from its rear, where the mother plane is following it, can have any effect on its steering apparatus.

AMATEUR CONTEST NEWS

THRILLING WONDER STORIES still continues its national hunt for new stories by new authors. It is the only scientifiction magazine publishing stories by its own readers! We believe that every one of our readers has an entertaining story to tell—and we'd like to see it.

Write up that pet interplanetary or time-traveling idea you've been hoarding to yourself all these years. Type it up, double-spaced, on regular manuscript paper, and send it to AMATEUR WRITER'S EDITOR, THRILLING WONDER STORIES, 10 East 40th Street, New York City, N. Y. Enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope for the return of your manuscript, if it is unavailable.

If your story is a fairly good one, we will be glad to publish it in T.W.S. Prize stories are purchased at the same rates paid to our regular staff writers. We want to present a brand-new writer in every issue, if possible. Why not try for the honor?

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And, readers—write our Sergeant Saturn regularly. Tell him which stories you like best, which are your favorite features and artists. Your suggestions and criticisms are helping to make T.W.S. the magazine YOU like best. A postcard will do as well as a letter—and beefs are as welcome as bouquets. The Sarge can take it—and wants to hear from every reader!—THE EDITOR.

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WITHOUT any preliminary rocket-blasting were we are again in the morass of mumbles, the labyrinth of laments and lambasts. Your old sarge has a few choice and juicy morsels to dish up this issue, so grab them while they're sizzling hot as grilled skitar steak at a Red Desert barbecue. Before we dig into this maelstrom of whirling words, I have a few remarks to make to a great many readers. So, cut your blast tubes, you hurlers of barbed adjectives, and listen in quietly to this ethergram.

In going through the mail bag this week for this department I was appalled at the number of letters and cards and communications which have accumulated during the past few months and which did not have the chance of being printed, many of them from kiwis who have never opened up to chirp before.

And now the subject matter is too many light years behind us for general broadcasting. No fooling, this makes the old sarge feel as blue as a mercury vapor-lamp, but there's no help for it now.

Here's what I'm asking you pilots to do: Forgive the old sarge for not being able to take on your cargo of words heretofore, forget that your messages were not broadcast, and kick right in with new dope—and I promise to use part, if not all, of as many ray-gun remarks as I can find space for. There's nothing the old sarge likes better than a good duel with expert marksmen.

And if all you space rats think I'm going to sit meekly here on my—chief astrogator's chair and print your lampoons and diatribes without sandwiching in a few missiles of my own in reply, you're crazy as a band of Venusian Swamp apes.

So let's have at it. Saturn has handled riot gangs before. Suppose we start off with a mild blast to keep from jerking us through the bottoms of our inertia hammocks.

BLASTING OFF THE COVER

By Chandler Davis

My dear Mr. Saturn: My first letter to ye olde THRILLING WONDER STORIES was written last month, in the heat of anger, I admit. I was sweating blue after an issue containing a nauseating cover, **your** comments on the letters, and two putrid literary efforts. Even the good **average** of the stories could not restrain me from violent language. But the April number—yahoo!

The cover, first of all, is nearly half as good as that on the **comics!** I repeat my statement that Bergey is a pretty decent artist, though the necessity of the Buck Rogers ray-gun emitting red, green, and blue smoke rings is obscure. My question on the cover is this: Why did Bergey miss the opportunity for a really distinctive jacket, somewhat like the interior decoration accompanying "Five after Five"? He could have worked that into an A-1 cover, which is, after all, the thing T. W. S. needs most.

The aforementioned T. W. S. certainly has all the A-1 literature it needs. The incredibly good stories this month have shaken my resolve to finish and submit an original s-f dithyramb; but keep it up just the same. With Kuttner, Giles, Barnes, Arthur, & Co. around you don't need any help from me.

Well, "The L. of T. to C." was magnifique, says I. No question about it, it was super. Among the shorts, three followed close after the novel and were so superb I don't know in what order to rank them: to wit, "Five after Five," "Evolution's End," and "Who Was Thomas Morrow?" I was annoyed by "Mystery World," for after nearly solving it, I discovered I had forgotten which of Jupiter's moons is biggest! Actually.. Well, anyhow, said tale was also most commendable. The remaining yarn was passable, nothing like the deplorable messes, "Plastic Pigskin Daze" and "Out of the Years," which intruded into the March number.

I'm feeling more friendly toward you, too, Saturn, old kid, because your reactions to the Finlay illustrations sure agree with mine. I'm too overcome to praise them at length, but they were the goods, and how! The vignettes tacked onto the various shorts were good, except for the atrocious Marchioni, of which my only remark is "Ye gods!"

As in my previous communication, I am adding a hearty yell to the swelling chorus demanding the return of the Science Quiz. Also I wish to request more articles, more Gordon Giles, less Pete Manx, less Sergeant Saturn. But just keep the mag up to the standard set by this here number, improve the cover slightly (oh, just slightly), and you'll have pretty near the best magazine in the science-fiction field. Maybe **the** best. Yowsah. Extremely sincerely yours—309 Lake Ave., Newton Highlands, Mass.

Well, now that we've cleared the strato-

In this department we shall publish your opinions very issue. After all, this is YOUR magazine, and it is edited for YOU. If a story in THRILLING WONDER STORIES fails to click with you, it is up to you to let us know about it. We welcome your letters whether they are complimentary or critical—or contain good old-fashioned brickbats! Write regularly! As many of your letters as possible will be printed herein. We cannot undertake to enter into private correspondence.

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sphere with that one, let's open a space port and clear the atmosphere. So you don't like Bergey's colored rings, eh? You should come around on Saturday afternoon and watch him paint figures of eight. Arabesques on Sunday.

Seriously, Pilot Davis, the idea of the colored rings is to dazzle the BEMs and kill off the villains in technicolor. And who are you to kick at a little splash of color? You wear Christmas neckties, don't you? At least, you are polite. The old sarge just had to leave that precious salutation and conclusion on your letter. This next guy coming up can't seem to make up his mind. A composite letter from a trio of space bums stranded at Spacemen's Haven on Ceres, it seems.

BRICKBATS FROM SPACE

By "Captain Venus"

Dear—er—un—"Sergeant": Oh, how it pains me to say it—sergeant, as in "Sergeant Saturn." All I got to say to that is NUTS!

That Sergeant Saturn stuff in a usually good science-fiction mag is strictly on the corny side. But good.

"The Old Space-Dog!" Phooey!

"A grizzled old space veteran!" Nerts.

In T. W. S., "The Reader Speaks" this fool "sergeant" rambles and rants on and on about such stuff as, and I quote: "Colliding comets, kiwis, and space-dogs," "space-grams and other flashes," "the pilot of this battered space-crate," "sacre nom de cosmic centrifuges," and "satellites of Saturn." It's sickening. Do the editors think we sf. fans are grammar school babies who are greatly impressed by a so-called "space-dog's" highly technical and spatial terms? Well, I'm impressed, but I won't say how.

In the first place, "Sergeant Saturn's" comments, while they include a few correct scientific terms, are not technical, and actually sound like the showing off of a very young kid who has read, without understanding, one or two sf. stories. Sergeant Saturn, the character himself, is unique and okay in itself, but the way he answers letters, the way he words his comments and remarks, and the way he acts are positively childish.

Modern sf. mags are supposed to be scientific and a little intelligent and logical, but this sarge has really done everything he possibly can to disprove this fact.

I know this is a very critical and sarcastic letter, but it merely expresses my sentiments when I read Sergeant Saturn's junk in "The Reader Speaks." It's absolutely insipid.

Keep Sergeant Saturn as a commenter in this column, but for Pluto's sake, change the way he writes the column, please. As it is now, confidentially—you know the rest. Surely this column can be changed in some slight way to improve it.

I doubt if you will print this, but I simply want to express my opinion, and those of several other sf. fans, in regard to your fairly new addition of Sergeant Saturn.—"Captain Venus."

Witnessed by:
"Lieutenant Mercury" and
"Corporal Uranus."

P.S. Nuts—I'm disgusted.

P.S., Jr. I really enjoyed Kuttner's "The Land of Time to Come," in T.W.S., April issue. Pardon the praise, gentlemen, but the story really was swell.

Drunk on Xeno bug juice, sure as the old space dog is a foot high. And delusions of grandeur, too. Hang on, you three planetoids until I can get there to make it a fourth, and we'll sing "Sweet Adenoid" while I pound your mugs on the table.

Comes now a peculiar cryptogram which smells like an intercepted spy cipher from the hinterlands of Mars. *[Turn page]*

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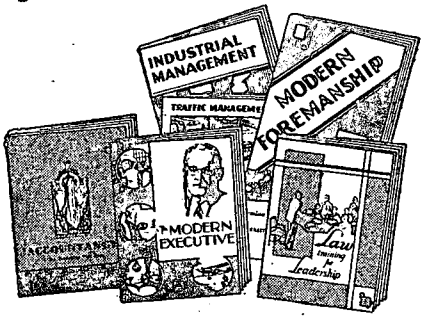

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PLOTS WHILE YOU WAIT

By Richard Baumler

To The Editor: I have a plot of a good s-f story, but I can't work it in to one. I would like to know if you would like to buy it?

A professor makes a time machine and needs money to go on with an experiment. So he uses the time machine to go back in time before whatever place he is going to rob is built, goes to where the vault is, comes back to 1940, robs the vault, goes back into time, goes to where his house will be and comes back to 1940 again and is safe.

If you do not buy plots you may have it—11741 Yellowstone Ave., Detroit, Mich.

Decoded, this means that the good professor found out when he returned to the present that the currency he stole in 1741 wasn't printed until 1945—which makes him his own grandfather. No, Richard, *you* can have it. The old sarge is having enough trouble herding the wild steers already in this department. Try me next time with an easy one. This idea was already threadbare when the Earth was shivering in the dawn of science fiction.

Leaping Frogfish of Pluto, here comes a sharpshooter with a needle ray!

YA-A-AH, I DARE YUH!

By Daniel P. King

Dear Sarge: I saw your June issue on the stands a week ago, and noted two fundamental improvements. Excelsior! A Wesso cover! I was wondering when you'd catch onto yourself. It's not up to his usual standard, but surely hope you'll give him another and another and another . . .

Second, you've gone bi-monthly. (This may sound queer, but don't ever go monthly again. Ever since you did, your mag has degenerated lower and lower. So stay bi-monthly. I'll list some improvements I'm in favor of:

1. Keep Wesso on the cover and alternate him with Paul, the mighty.
2. Give Paul and Wesso and Finlay all the inside work, and can those other cartoonists, especially Marchioni.
3. Continue your policy of one long novel, two novelets, and 3 or 4 shorts.
4. Take out the advertising pages between the contents page and the first story, and put them at the back, if need be.
5. Use the editor's page for the editorial and comments, and put those remarkable facts now occuping that place in the scientifacts, which, by the way, is a good department.
6. Continue the science article!
7. Change the name back to Science Wonder Stories, which sounds better.
8. Take most of the printing off the cover.
9. Your novels and novelets usually drag, so why not take all this great adventure stuff out, put in a good science basis, and humor. Get writers who can really write. Your short stories usually are good; not always.
10. Good writers: Eando Binder, Nelson S. Bond, Jack Williamson, Clifford D. Simak, L. Ron Hubbard, and lots of others. You know 'em.
11. Put in a serial.

While I am at it I'll stick my neck out. Thus:

12. Go large size.
13. Return to slick paper.

Now there, don't throw that! I know the old editorial chant—can't afford it, can't afford it. Well, you can afford it if you'd raise the price to 25c. I know your circulation would rise at least 20 percent. Or maybe you don't want to be the best stf. magazine on the market?

If you did these things I, for one, know that I'd start buying T.W.S. again, instead of just leafing through it down at Jenk's Smoke Shop. But under the present management, what will happen? Zero. In fact, I challenge you to do these things and print this. Bah!

And if you do print it, don't you dare cut a word out, see? I'll bet you won't even think of taking my challenge! Again, Bah! With all good interest—Colorado Springs, Colo.

Go on, knock that chip off my shoulder—I dare you! Now aren't you ashamed of yourself, Pee-lot King? Space sickness, that's what it is. Rx—one teaspoonful of Xeno snake bite every light mile. I had to cut out a few lines of your chant "Can't afford it." But I did do you a favor and made your broadside more effective by cutting out your first paragraph in which you ordered another membership card, enclosing a name-strip from T.W.S. Here's a friendly flash from a pal. Get a squint at it.

A GENERAL OVERHAULING

By Alfred Edward Maxwell

Dear Sarge: You really deserve being reprimanded, for the April issue was, undoubtedly, your worst yet. I mean worst in a general sort of a way The cover, the illustrations and the stories were all below par.

The most important thing in any magazine is the stories. That is what I plunked down my fifteen cents for when I picked up TWS. I was confident that, after "Remember Tomorrow," etc., Henry Kuttner would turn out a nice yarn in "The Land Of Time To Come," so I left it until last. But I was bitterly disappointed. The body, the brilliance, and the life of the other novels was not here. For a feature novel it was poor, but I must admit that there were some parts that held my interest thoroughly. It was the best in the issue, naturally.

In second place is another enjoyable, but unsensational yarn, "Earth For Inspiration." I had to think twice before putting it under TLOTTC, for I really liked it.

The rest rated as follows: (3) "Evolution's End"—I had dodged the "kick-in-the-face" ending from the first page. (4) "Who Was Thomas Morrow?"—too much like four or five others I have read. Not too bad, nevertheless. (5) "Five After Five"—Maybe I didn't understand it. (6) "Mystery World"—Good, if it had been an extra or a contest yarn, but as a story, poor. Anyway, I said Callisto and that isn't so far wrong.

Strangely enough, the departments and features almost took the cake over the yarns. By all means keep SCIENTIFACTS. This is the best feature of its type in the field. LOOKING FORWARD should be longer and more informal. THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY has now become an indispensable department. As usual, THE READER SPEAKS was V.G. Keep it as long as you had it in this issue. I'd suggest that Sergeant Saturn makes his comments a little shorter.

The illustrations were mediocre. Wesso as indistinct as ever. Morey as misshapened as ever. Finlay as wonderful as ever. And Marchioni as poor as ever. Bergey turned out his worst try yet with the April ish. And above all else, WHEREINELL IS PAUL?

Why not let Belarski toss up a cover for TWS. His top for the July SS was the best yet. His interior work is as superb; I already class him better than Wesso.

Give me: Less Wesso, oodles of Paul, no more Marchioni, a lot of Belarski, some more Finlay, heaps of Wellman, Binder, or Williamson, and I'll be satisfied—118 West Madison Street, Opelousas, Louisiana.

A couple of quarts of space fuel and a half-pint of Xeno, and we can take off for a test trip to Pluto and back. Like playing a rubber of Martian bridge to see who deals first. Comes now a gentle kick in the pants for Ray Cummings.

ESCAPE FROM FACTS

By George Malsbary

Dear Sergeant Saturn: I've read science fiction since 'way back—some dating from 1929

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and 1930, and I think that TWS is, in most respects, living up to its colorful past. It has far more human interest and action now, and that's what counts with we readers.

I have just read "Out of Smallness," by Ray Cummings, in your June issue, and there's one question I'd like to ask about it. Do we need war stories, even scientifiction war stories, in a magazine used by the public for escape? For science fiction is ideal escape literature, you know.

Please don't think that I'm trying to criticize Mr. Cummings' colorful plot and excellent technique. It only seems to me that he could have chosen a theme which varies from the headlines and news broadcasts a little. We look to TWS mainly to get our minds on something far removed from the deplorable conditions in our world today. Aside from this point, I'd say that the general makeup of your mag is head and shoulders above its competitors—1183 W. 24th St., Los Angeles, Calif.

It's a lovely season, George; why don't you take a vacation cruise to Ganymede and study the Trojan Bandulaubs in their native haunts? Or, if you want escape, drop in at the Spacemen's Haven on Ceres and lap up six ounces of double-distilled Xeno.

They have a barman there who decants the stuff over ice fragments from Nepenthe Ravine on Pluto where the Never-never lilies bloom that will remind you of the old absinthe frappes of New Orleans, Earth.

Seriously, if you want to read another type of yarn by Ray Cummings, watch for his robot yarns which will be trickling through shortly like Xeno through the Plutonian ice fragments.

HOORAY—A FAN LETTER!

By F. U. Albers

Dear Sarge: Salutations and felicitations, Sarge. Last time I wrote with a total of two issues of TWS under my belt. But this time it only requires one to set me off like a Martian fire ball!

Since everything about this June issue was so good, I'll just start with Wesso's cover, and proceed in rotation.

That cover should prove my mild contention: BEMs are totally unnecessary on covers. Those beasties were really okay, the men were handsome brutes, and Old Glory gave that wierd scene a touch of significance totally compelling and also very pleasing. Wesso, take a bow.

More cheers, and these for Hawkins novel titled "Power for Zenovia." There seems to be no limit to the story possibilities founded on the nerve synapse or the unused portion of the brain. Either one or both are dandy sources for a good writer, and Hawkins has certainly proven his ability with this story. So give him a new and well inked ribbon, first prize, and a pull from the jug, Sarge. He has earned it.

Frank Long's novelet concerning the interplanetary Olympics takes a close second place to Hawkins' winner. Plenty of human interest, plenty of "science," plenty of what it takes generally to ring the bell in this man's magazine.

"Tube To Nowhere" re-instates Kuttner. Yep, we'll keep him for a pet at least. Much better in this one than in his long (and lost) effort in the April mag. Give him the tin medal designating the third place winner, and a fresh supply of dream pellets. He may be okay yet.

"Fatal Asteroid," Walton's yarn, well now, that was better than all right, too. I'd spot it just ahead of the two stories by Garth and Cummings, and at the same time, I flatly refuse to say which one of **those** was the better story. That's the one kink in this job of picking the placings for June: **all** the stories were surprisingly good, and when you loll back and try to parade them through your

[*Turn page*]

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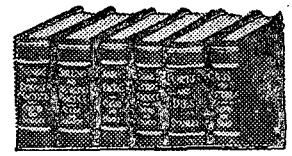

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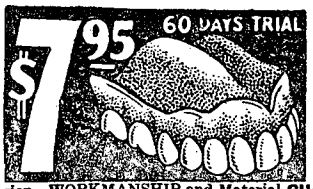

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memory, you'll find that the short stories for this, that or the other reason were just about on a par.

I usually read the Special Features first, and right there I found the one thing I sure don't like. "The Swap Column." Thanks to Aro Dickson, I now know how to spell the only word for **that.** It is "phfffffft!" Sarge, ol' boy, aren't there several hundred other mags on the market that carry the same useless thing? Does TWS have to have it, too? If that "gem" was deleted, you would have room for another letter from a discerning lad like Wickland of Oshkosh. Rippling Rings, but didn't he ladle out a real tureenful? Didn't take six pages for it, either. Heh—heh.

Darn. 'Way past perihelion as regards the evening retirement, so I'll give 'er back to you now. If you spot any more drifting digits like Dickson, dunk 'em delirious and drop 'em down in a dungeon—Twin Bridges, Mont.

Thanks for the flowers, Pilot Albers. They smell nice in the midst of the brickbats. But I wouldn't have this wild gang of spaceteers let up on me for anything in the Solar System. If all you birds wrote in sweet love notes I'd know you were all sick—spiritless as a squad of miners coming up from a Mercurian underground bismuth lake. Yeah, that's the hot spot where more minerals than water and quicksilver run in liquid form. Sure, that's the solution. And I've got to have something to growl about, haven't I?

And was I just about to pop off here like the safety valve on a gas fuel tank when I came to this last letter from a space port in California. What? Why the old Saturnian ire? Because—up to this point—not a gol-durned peep from that group of our up and coming crop of excellent readers—the gals. But Sister Smith saves the day, and I won't maroon you space tramps in the Asteroid Belt after all.

GOOD OLD ORCHIDS

By Mrs. L. C. Smith

Dear Sarge: Here comes another fan who's kept mum till now, but I've been so tickled with the novels in the last few issues that I had to toss a few orchids. There are no rocks tied in the ribbons, either, unless I should mention a few of the short stories that have been taking up such valuable space. But why kick? You have to please everybody.

Tell Hawkins to drop in again with another novel like "Power for Zenovia." Though not basically a new idea, it was dressed up in a new fashion. And if clothes make the woman, why not the story?

TWS is rapidly becoming my favorite mag—and I read them all. There are so many on the market that when I get hungry I make a stew of the old ones to save my money for new copies.

How about another novel from Kuttner? Well, if I didn't like the stories, there's still THE READER SPEAKS. For heaven's sake, keep this department as it is.

Again I say keep on with the good novels and the others will get by okay—1845 Prince Street, Berkeley, Calif.

There you are, you space yappers. That winds up the mail bag and news flashes to date. Before we blast on across the starry void of thought and fact and fancy toward the next issue (poetic license by Xeno, Inc.) let me leave you a final message. How about some dope from you who attended the Denvention of science fans, fumblers, and fighters? You may fuel and fire when ready, Grid.

—SERGEANT SATURN,
The old space-dog.

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Frank G., born November 4, 1895, asks: Will I receive my share of the inheritance soon?
Answer: March seems favorable.

Bertha K., born January 8, 1910, asks: Will I find my missing rings?
Answer: No.

Warren E., born May 24, 1900, asks: Will my father sell his farm?
Answer: In the late spring.

Loren F. G., born September 29, 1904, asks: When will I marry?
Answer: Early fall.

Carola S. T., born July 4, 1897, asks: If I take a civil service examination this spring will the results be favorable?
Answer: Yes.

Vail J., born February 25, 1892, asks: Will my sister come to America to live or go elsewhere?
Answer: The vibrations are favorable for America.

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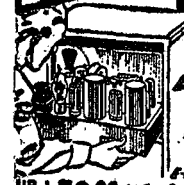

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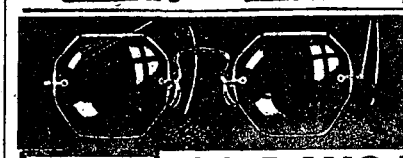

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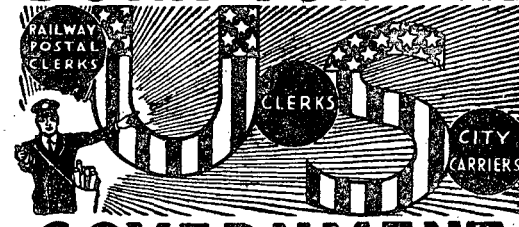

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THE PURPLE BAT

(Continued from page 117)

ran across the starlit grounds toward the house. Ross muttered a curse, fired a shot over their heads. They turned back, took cover in a building a hundred yards away.

"Get down!" shouted Ross over the siren howl. He switched off the light. "There'll be fireworks in a minute."

He crouched below a window-sill, the gun he had taken from Spork ready to fire. Orro handed Janet a gun. They took up positions at the other windows. There was silence in the room. Suddenly a window shattered, showering Ross with broken glass. He took careful aim and squeezed the trigger. One of Ostend's men, who had unwisely shown himself, fell.

A rapid-fire burst from the darkness spent itself harmlessly on the side of the house. Ostend's men were keeping carefully under cover. Scattered shots rang out occasionally. The guns of the besieged were silent. They were holding their fire until they could see something to shoot at.

Suddenly a score of men dashed across the grounds, covered from the rear by rapid-fire guns. The three returned the fire, taking careful aim and shooting deliberately. When seven of the attackers had fallen, the rest broke and scattered.

Orro whispered something in Ross' ear. The traveling salesman nodded. The Parrag left one of his guns with Ross and scurried from the room.

"Where's he going?" asked Janet.

"Reinforcements," grunted Ross, squinting as he pumped a bullet in the direction of an Outpostian who had shown himself.

Ostend, having sounded the alarm, made no further attempt at freedom. He sat huddled in a corner, all his spirit gone. Spork had come to and Ross was tying him. There was a tense silence. Each side seemed to be waiting for the other to start something.

Ross still felt numb. How could she be so callous? The fact that her father's corpse was still lying in the room didn't seem to bother her.

"Dan! Look!"

He peered out a window. Ostend's men had brought up the diesel car.

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The motor roared as it shot across the grounds toward them.

"It's coming straight at us!" screamed Janet. "It's going to ram us!"

"Look over there."

Ross pointed. Around a corner of the building, where Ostend's men had taken cover, there loped a horde of Parrags. As they watched, those in the fore dropped flat and fired at the speeding car. The car swerved crazily as the driver fell over the wheel, dead. It crashed into a pile of rock.

The rest of Ostend's men saw the army of Parrags. They threw down their weapons in a panic, held up their hands. At that moment a squadron of planes with the insignia of the Tulonian Guard glinting in the starshine appeared above the Outpost.

"Cops!" exclaimed Ross. "How did they get here?"

"They flew," explained Janet.

They ran from the house. The planes landed. Out of the first stepped a white-haired men who rushed toward Janet.

"Dad!" she cried, darting into his arms.

"Are you all right, my dear?" he asked, kissing her.

"Fine, Dad. I want you to meet Daniel Ross. You probably know him pretty well by now."

Dan stared in open-mouthed amazement at the exact double of the man lying dead on the floor in the house. Then he impolitely wandered off to stare dazedly in at the window. Janet laughed, caught him by the arm.

"This is my father," she said.

"How do you do," Dan said absently. "But who's the corpse in the parlor?"

The real Professor Vickers smiled.

"Just a robot," he said. "He was a hobby of mine. He gave my interviews to reporters, or answered the door when salesmen called." He chuckled. "The blank stare I gave him on those occasions soon scared away unwanted visitors."

"Sh-h, Dad," whispered Janet. "Dan's a salesman.

"That's all right, sir," Ross said. "Please excuse me if I'm a little bewildered. Things have been happening so fast lately that I haven't been

[*Turn page*]

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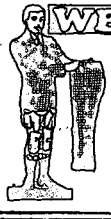

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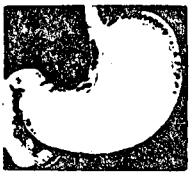

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quite able to catch up with them."

"You ask, we'll answer," suggested Janet.

"All right. How was your fa—the robot, I mean—able to carry on intelligent conversations, perform experiments, and so forth? He was so dog-gone real! Ostend's no fool. Why didn't he discover the fraud?"

"The robot was my hobby," replied Vickers. "Since every man works harder at his hobby than his job, I went to town on my duplicate. He was radio-television controlled. I literally saw through his eyes. At first it was fun, running Ostend ragged. He was the only one who saw the robot at close range, but the fact that he's almost blind kept him from finding that he'd kidnaped an automaton. But when Janet appeared on the scene, it was difficult to call the police and keep my eyes glued to the control box. It was a relief when I died."

"And you knew it was a robot all the time?" Dan asked Janet.

"Sure," she answered casually.

"Then why risk your life—not to mention mine—in a cockeyed attempt to save a lot of wiring and plastic?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Dan's hands clenched and he gritted his teeth.

"I ought to wring your neck!"

"Sometimes," agreed Vickers, "I feel that way myself."

"I have just one more question," Dan said. "When Ostend butted in on that Purple Bat program, how did you know he had the robot and not your father?"

"Remember the ventilating system you saw me switch on just before we left?" Janet asked. "Well, it wasn't a ventilating system at all. It was a signal to Dad's lab. The answering signal meant he was there."

"Besides," Vickers added, "I had left Janet ten minutes before, when I saw you hovering around in your two-seater."

"He said: 'If that's a salesman, tell him to go to blazes'," quoted Janet.

Ross laughed. "I hope you've changed your mind about salesmen. I have a hunch I'll be calling pretty often—and not to sell wrist television sets, either."

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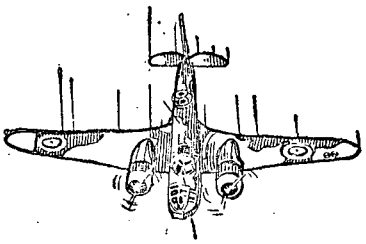
"Speaking of that, my boy," said Vickers professorially, "I spent a few days tinkering with that unsalable device of yours. Like most beginners, your company tried to drive out competition by offering the impossible. The fuel battery is much too powerful, causing considerable shock to the user. If you will substitute a smaller fuel battery, the result will be much more satisfactory."

"Well, so that's it, eh?" Ross smiled with anticipation, glancing at Janet's slim ring-finger. "You don't know it, but you've just sold me a partnership in a rising young corporation, Professor, and I think you're going to be stuck with a very close relative soon."

Janet and her father pretended not to understand, but Ross caught the wink that passed between them when they thought he wasn't looking.

Air Fans, Attention!



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5.50-17	2.75	1.15
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29x5.50-19	2.75	1.15
6.00-16	2.15	1.45
6.00-17	2.85	1.15
30x5.00-18	2.85	1.15
31x6.00-19	2.85	1.15
32x6.00-20	2.95	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.10	1.25
32x6.50-20	3.20	1.35

TRUCK BALLOONS

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$5.10	$1.65
6.50-20	3.35	1.95
7.00-20	4.60	2.95
7.50-20	5.15	3.75
8.25-20	6.75	4.95

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$3.50	$1.95
32x6	6.98	2.75
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36x8	9.65	3.95
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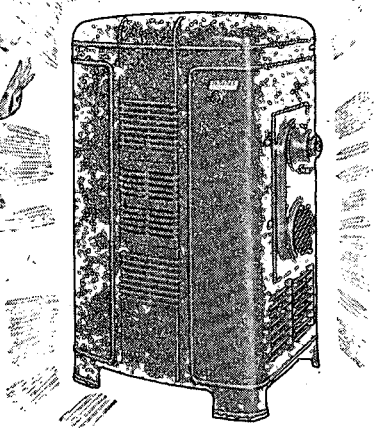

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